

Editor's Foreword:

I hope I'm not out of line with this release, I just thought it would be nice to have a more streamlined version of the *Full Metal Panic!* series.

I couldn't contact any of the original translators/editors to ask their permission to edit their work, but really all I did with this volume was take their later corrections and retroact them (for example changing Dannigan to Danigan and so on).

I left in the first and last sentiments by the original translator, and some notes in the middle, but since I corrected all the things they talked about in their in-between chapters releases, and since I'm releasing this as one whole volume, I got rid of the notes between chapters because they weren't relevant anymore.

Once again I really didn't mean to make anyone upset about changing their work, but since these releases are from so long ago I couldn't get in touch with anybody to ask them for permission. Hopefully they'll forgive me.

I intend to edit all of the volumes from here until the end of the series such that they all share consistent terminology and formatting.

Books 4, 5, 6, 7, and the first half of 8 are already very well translated and edited, as are books 11 and 12. I'll do my best to not change practically anything there other than formatting and terminology.

The second half of book 8, and books 9 and 10 need a lot more work than that. Those were only very roughly translated and never edited as far as I can tell. I hope to do my best to edit those translations into an easily readable narrative while still trying to stay true to the translations.

I've made the page sizes (and therefore pictures) a bit smaller than they were originally (sorry about that). My intent was that they be easier to read on a tablet. Most of the images you can find larger versions of in the other releases or with a reverse image search, so hopefully no one minds too much. I'll also include alternate covers at the end (this one has covers from 1-3 as well).

Well, I've said a lot already so everything that follows is pretty much from the original release, enjoy!

Translator's Foreword:

The following translation is from the original Full Metal Panic! novel, "Owaru DEE-BAI-DEE" (pt. 1). This is not the first volume of the series; this is volume eight, and this story picks up where the first Full Metal Panic! Anime series (sometimes known as season one) left off. I did this because I personally wanted to know what happened after the end of the anime series, and the only continuation available was in novel form. After I started reading it a little, I decided that I wanted to undertake it as a translation project, not only for my better understanding, but also to share it with others who have an interest in the series and would also like to know what happened after Sousuke and Kaname's fishing trip.

As suggested by the title, this book is part one of two, both books being a little over 200 pages a piece. If you couldn't tell, this is a massive amount of work to do (especially in one's spare time), so I hope everyone is a little patient for new translations. Also, because this is a novel, and not manga, it was necessary to be somewhat liberal in my translation. I have tried to keep as close to the original meaning as much as possible, but I did have to make it readable in English. Also, this series uses a lot of foreign words in names of places, people, and weapons, and while I have done my best to research to assure the correct spellings, there may be some mistakes. If there are, please contact me so that I may correct them in the future.

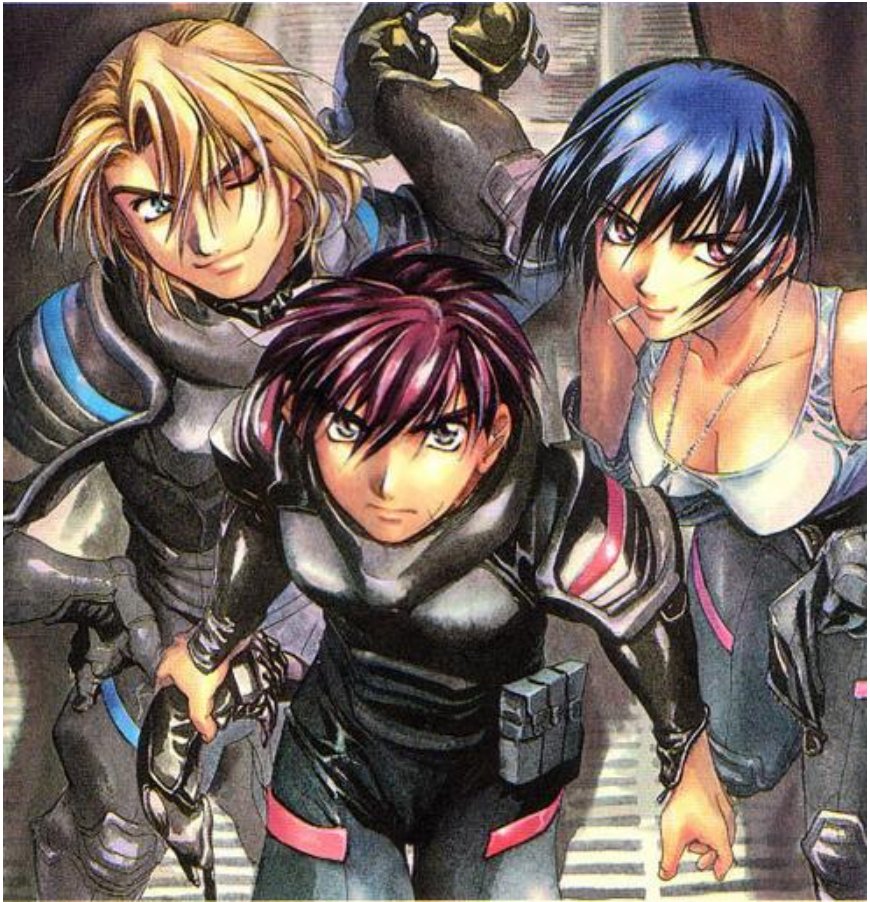
As the translator, I am fully aware that the author retains all rights and privileges to his original work, including translations, and I do not take any credit for its creation, nor do I profit from it. However, as translating is such a delicate art, especially books, I will not allow retranslations of this translation into other languages, nor allow people to change this translation and distribute it.

Anyway, legal stuff out of the way, enjoy!

Full Metal Panic!

Ending Day by Day (Part 1)

By Shoji Gatoh



Translator: Brandi

Editors: Mukanshin, Moonfaerie24

Prologue

There was a red compact car parked in the back of the north school building.

It was a model from four or five years ago, and of cheap design. It had a number of small scratches, and its tires were worn bald. Because of several days of rain, the hood and roof were dirty, giving the domestic car an even more seedy appearance.

“That’s a car I’m not used to seeing,” said Kaname Chidori, looking down at the compact car from a window in the second floor corridor.

“It is?” replied her classmate Kyouko Tokiwa, who was standing next to her.

They had stopped on the way back to their classroom after returning a book to the library. It was lunchtime now. Normally, you could see the shapes of students playing ball in the back of the building, but not today. That was probably because second semester mid-term exams had started the day before. Many students now filled the classrooms, fighting with textbooks and notes.

“It’s also parked in a strange place. See? There really aren’t any cars parked over there.”

“I guess not.”

“Anyway, we’d better hurry back to class. I have a test.”

“Okay.”

Kaname and Kyouko turned back towards the second year group four classroom without giving the car a second thought.

Later, the two girls opened their textbooks, discussing the questions for next day’s midterm. The school bell chimed over the intercom.

“Testing, testing... This is the assistant to the president of the student body.”

The voice belonged to Sousuke Sagara, who was in the same class as Kaname and Kyouko. They looked around, but couldn't see him in the classroom.

“To the person who parked the red compact car in the back of the north building: Please contact me in the student meeting room immediately. I repeat: Would the person who parked the red compact car in the back of the north building please contact me in the student meeting room immediately. License plate number: Tama 50-”

After carefully repeating the license plate number three times, he silenced the speaker. It was just like an announcement you would hear at a department store or some other place, calling out to the inconveniently parked customer.

“Isn't that the car we saw earlier?”

“...what is Sagara doing?”

“Who knows?”

She didn't really understand what was going on, but the announcement was probably being heard in the staff room and the principal's office. As such, the owner of the car would probably get in touch with Sousuke right away.

So there wasn't really a problem.

Thirty minutes later, Kaname and Kyouko were continuing their studying.

“Now, what's the meaning of ‘In spite of~’?” asked Kaname, pulling the question from the sentence structure of an English text.

“Huh? I don't know. Where did you get that from?”

“Page 88.”

“Where is it...? Ah, here, chapter ten. That won’t be on the test.”

“What? Yes it will.”

“No, it won’t. Ms. Kagurazaka didn’t say that it would be during class.”

“What are you talking about? She said it would be in there.”

“No she didn’t.”

“Yes she did!”

“Did not!”

They continued back and forth in a heated debate, when finally the two decided to ask Eri Kagurazaka from the English department directly. They left the classroom and went towards the staff room. Opening the door with the warning sign of “Exam preparations in progress- Students are not to enter!” pasted on it, they called to Eri from outside of the staff room.

“Excuse me, Ms. Kagurazaka!”

“What is it?” she replied from behind them.

They looked around to find Eri Kagurazaka standing there, holding a white plastic bag.

“Oh, you left?”

“Yes. I did a little shopping at the discount store in the shopping center,” she said, taking car wash and car wax out of the bag and showing it to them.

“What’s that?”

“I just got my license the other day, and today I drove the family car to work for the first time,” Eri replied genially. “I was thinking I might use the water spigot in the back of the building to wash the car later.” Somehow, she seemed to be separated from school after lunchtime began.

“...Umm, did you hear the announcement earlier?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Anyway, will you please tell Kaname that chapter ten won’t be on the exam?”

“No, chapter ten won’t be on the exam.”

“I knew it! See, told you!” said Kyouko in a cocky manner, as if she had just taken the head of an ogre.

“Oh, I see. Sorry.”

After Kaname had admitted defeat, she promptly walked off.

“Kaname?”

“Gloat later, okay? I have other things to worry about right now.”

Abandoning Kyouko, she walked away from the front of the staff room in big, heavy strides, heading towards the north building. Why, she wondered, was there a strange uneasiness? She went down to the first floor, left the school building through the emergency exit, and walked until she came to the spot where the car from earlier was parked-

“...!!”

All that was left were the bits and pieces to which the unsightly car had been reduced.

Its four tires were lying on the ground. The hood was resting up against the wall. The fake leather seats had been neatly arranged. Not to mention numerous nuts and bolts, engine parts... And the doors, as well, had been removed.

“SOOUSUKEEEE!?” Kaname shouted, and Sousuke Sagara looked around. He was holding a grandiose detector, and had started to investigate one of the seats he had just dismantled.

“Don’t approach, Chidori!” he yelled in a sharp voice, “I haven’t secured the area yet. My death alone will be sufficient.” And with a serious look and sweat running down his temples, he continued his work.

“Y-you, just who do you think that car you’re tearing up belongs to?!”

“Unknown. It’s a suspicious vehicle, which is why I’m investigating it.”

“Wh... What are you talking about!?”

“A car bomb,” Sousuke replied in dead earnest. “If plastic explosives are loaded up and concealed, a car such as this one can become a devastating weapon. In 1983, an Islamic Jihad Organization called “Hezbollah” used a truck loaded with explosives to carry out a kamikaze attack on a U.S. military base in Lebanon. Do you know what the death toll was from that?”

“Like I would!”

“241 people! 241 brave and valiant marines, all blown up in a split second. And there’s no guarantee anywhere that a tragedy of that proportion won’t happen to this school!”

“It already has!!” she said, rushing headlong into Sousuke and knocking him down. He fell to the asphalt, dropping his detector and tools.

“Chidori, what are you-”

“This is Ms. Kagurazaka’s car! And just earlier she was excited that she was getting to wash it! But you...how are you going to clean this up!?”

“But the high-powered explosives-”

“There aren’t any, are there!?”

Her anger rising even more, she kicked him over again.

“Put it back together! Now! This won’t just be a regular apology when she finds out. No, she’s got such a weak constitution she might faint in a second. That means we have a really big problem!!”

“This is Ms. Kagurazaka’s car? Really?”

“Why would I lie about something like that!?”



“Hmm...”

With a severe look, he stared at the pile of parts that used to be a compact car.

“This is a problem. I can’t reassemble it quickly.”

“Then don’t take it apart in the first place!”

Just as she knocked him down for a third time, an electronic sound came from Sousuke’s chest.

Beep beep beep beep beep...

“Hmm...”

He excitedly reached into his jacket and pulled out a cell phone. He pressed the “Call” button and answered, whispering in English.

“This is Uruz 7... I see, but... 2 and 6? ...understood. I understand. Go to the field on Route 10...yes. Understood.”

After talking for a while, he hung up the phone and quickly began to straighten up his tools.

“Hey, what is it?”

“Urgent business. I have to leave early.”

“Again? ...hey, wait. What about the car!?”

“If you think about priorities-”

Sousuke looked down at the pile of parts in obvious distress.

“As I thought, I have no choice but to leave the car as it is,” he said.

“Please tell something to the teacher,” and with that, he grabbed his satchel and ran off.

“Sousuke!? Hey! Are you out of your mind!? Besides... what about tomorrow’s midterms!? Aaah, dammit... he’s gone again. I swear...”

She hurriedly saw Sousuke off, who had just abandoned the place like a criminal from the scene of the crime, and clicked her tongue.

Another “job”, huh?

How come that organization gets to order him around without any excuses?

She frowned as the thought crossed her mind. Then, after examining the remnants of the compact car, she looked around the nearby vicinity.

Th... this is a good time to run, isn't it...?

That's right. No matter how much I might want to, it isn't my duty to fix this mess. Anyway, it would be impossible.

Dumbfounded by the trouble of making up an explanation for later, Kaname gave a “tsk” and ran away from the scene. She returned to the classroom. Around the time the bell chimed five o'clock, the sounds of a female teacher screaming and wailing came ringing from the distance.

Kaname's face fell on her desk and she plugged her ears.

I'm so sorry, Ms. Kagurazaka. It's all his fault.

Chapter 1: Silent Commandment

October 13th, 20:42 (Western Pacific Standard Time)
Mithril Merida Island Base, Western Pacific Ocean
Meeting Room

Teletha Testarossa and nine ghosts were encircled around a black table. They were ashen, colorless, and pale figures of men, obscured in the middle of a veil of static noise.

They were executives who were spread throughout various places in the world, assembling this time in an online meeting.

The low resolution of the holographic screen that projected the men was caused by the high level of encryption in the satellite communication. Their movements were by no means replicated smoothly, as the frequencies were switching at about two second intervals. The jerkiness in the movements of the figures was reminiscent of an old claymation cartoon.

“And to conclude-” said the staff officer from intelligence headquarters, after dragging the explanation of the summary out for 30 minutes.

“Here at Intelligence Headquarters, we feel that tracking John Howard Danigan and Guen Bien Bo’s movements beforehand is impractical. We are physically limited on the follow-ups we can do on individual members’ pasts, temperaments, and the state-of-affairs concerning their assets... therefore, we believe this was not all owing to the dispositions of the parties responsible. That is all.”

Voices of ridicule came from four of the nine executives. Three of them were commanders of their own squadrons like Teletha, and one was the head of military operations, Admiral Jerome Borda. The reason the commanders were complaining was

obvious. Even though it was the job of Intelligence to check all Mithril personnel, they were asserting in a round-about way that the “final responsibility rests upon the commanders”. All that was left for the commanders to say was “That’s preposterous!”

In fact, that’s just about what Admiral Borda said.

“The whole past 30 minutes was a joke, wasn’t it? Give me a break.”

He was normally a good-natured sort of man, but there was a rare sharpness in his voice. The three other commanders echoed the sentiment.

“Really, let’s listen to a more constructive opinion.”

“It’s like the automobile maker who ships defective parts saying ‘The accident was your fault’. Well then, what should we do? Walk a hundred kilometers without using a car?”

The staff officer from the Intelligence agency flinched uneasily, but his superior, the President of Intelligence, General Amit, did not seem to be perturbed.

“These are just the hard facts of our investigation,” he said quietly. “In particular, the members chosen to be SRT replacements lack a high amount of experience and connections, as well as intelligence and cunning. It is because of this that we are in need of talented men. If someone were using a very elaborately set-up secret account and receiving money from a third party, gathering information about him would be a monumental task, wouldn’t you say?”

“So you’re saying you can’t help it one way or another!?”

“I’m saying we can’t help it at all, Admiral.”

The President of Intelligence remained calm.

“Put the members that take such an important office under 24-hour surveillance, right? Or would that encourage betrayal? It’s nonsense. The ones who would hate such a way of doing things

would be the SRT replacements.” That was the final rebuke. The organization called “SRT” (Special Response Team) that the commanders used was the one reason they produced such fit results, due in part to their excellent independent spirits, flexibility, and survival skills.

“This is a structural problem. As long as Mithril is a mercenary unit, there will be a limit to the soldiers’ loyalty. No matter how adequately we compensate them (if I am to believe Sergeant Weber’s report, it was \$500,000), dangling that amount of money in front of them would even attract enemies. The human conscience is a weak thing.”

“...”

“And we can’t forget that they were using Major Bruno. There were no other Operations departments, right?”

Major Bruno. He had been staffed in Operations Headquarters and arranged for Danigan and Guen to be assigned to the *Tuatha de Danaan*. The opinions that Major Bruno was a member of the “enemy organization”, and that he had been guiding terrorists through were ones that both the Intelligence Department and Operations Department agreed on.

Immediately after the incident on the *Tuatha de Danaan*, Bruno ran away from Operations Headquarters.

Because of that, Mithril was forced to change a large amount of classified information: code systems, security protocols, supply routes, safe house locations. Facilities which were physically impossible to move, such as the Merida Island Base, remained as they were, but implemented stronger security measures. But a budget had been necessary so that all of the operations wouldn’t get out of hand.



“If the news of what had happened on the TDD-1 had not been made known, Bruno probably wouldn’t have even had any doubts. He would have stayed in the organization- excuse me.”

The President of Intelligence cut off his statement and lit a cigarette. His virtual body blew smoke out smoothly.

“-he would have stayed in the organization, and might have caused even more damage.”

“But that didn’t happen, all thanks to Captain Testarossa’s quick thinking.”

“Right. And because of that, she became ignorant of her management responsibilities. That’s the complaint, isn’t it?”

The obscure figure of the President of Intelligence glanced over at Tessa. She looked down at her hands without saying anything.

“The TDD-1 almost sank. Our assault submarine- our greatest asset with the greatest fighting power.”

“As long as there are weapons, there will always be the possibility of losing them. We expected to resolve this a year ago, since, at the time, we decided to entrust the ship to a fifteen year old girl and send it out to sea.”

“...”

Admiral Borda snorted his nose a little, and was quiet like someone discouraged.

“...Is that all?”

When he perceived that no one else had a remark, Sir Mallory, who had been silent up until now, opened his mouth to speak. He was an elderly gentleman who wore an eyeglass and three-piece suit. He was considerably advanced in age, but still carried himself well.

“Very well. Then please allow me to state my opinion... The structural problem which Mr. Amit pointed out has been expected since the very creation of this organization. Unlike the regular army, Mithril doesn’t have the support of nations, religion, or national policies; we are called the “Interceptors of International

Disputes”, and we have to believe in our ideals, even if others have objections to them. Besides, I thought that you were the ones who were fighting, but... am I wrong?”

Sir Mallory looked around once. Not one person said “nay”.

“Good. Then I assume we’re through placing blame concerning this problem. Of course, please strike up a counter-plan. I expect it’s possible to turn a 1% danger into one that is only 0.5%. We will reconsider our present procedures in order to propose feasible countermeasures. Also-” He stopped mid-sentence and adjusted his eyeglass. “We will resume the investigation into the enemy in the same way we always have... That is all. I bid you farewell, gentlemen.”

The old man’s figure and voice disappeared, and nothing remained in the empty room except for the words “Line Terminated. Call Hang-up”. That was the signal for each of the world’s executives to disappear one by room from the online meeting.

In the end, only Admiral Borda remained.

Borda was a middle-aged man who had an abundant amount of black hair with some white beginning to mingle in. His physical condition was dignified for his age, and his face and arms were sunburned and firm.

He looked at Tessa and spoke comfortingly.

“I think they’ll object to losing a subordinate. You’re the only one who can do it.”

Mithril was divided into three large sections: Department of Operations, Department of Intelligence, and the Department of Research. In this, the Department of Operations, four squads from Operations Headquarters made up the *Tuatha de Danaan*. They collected necessary information for operations, which the Department of Intelligence analyzed and evaluated- Admiral Amit

was pinned as the “person responsible”. The Intelligence Department and others act as an information supply to give advice to each nation, trying to make it so that the Operations Department could minimize the “use of force”.

However, it couldn't be said that the Operations, Intelligence and Research departments got along well. It didn't go as far as hostility, but... nevertheless, they didn't go so far as to roll up their sleeves to get along, either.

Since it was routine for the Department of Operations to rage on, saying “The information you presented was incorrect. Thanks to you we almost died. Why did you do that!?”, the Department of Intelligence would always come back with “Even though we've collected this much information, you still think we're the problem!? Don't be so arrogant!” Although this wasn't just limited to Mithril, what other organizations had these kinds of problems?

“However, that jerk Amit's got a point. This is something always beset with risks. And there are still many scenarios where we will have to pay the price...”

“I understand,” Tessa replied half-heartedly.

“What should you do? Of course, I can't see things from your standpoint. Even if there had been no incident, you still have a lot of school left. Come back to Operations Headquarters. There are also important jobs in the Department of Research, so you could have Mardukas and the others take control of the ship. How does that sound? You can begin-”

“I have said it many times: I will not leave this department,” she stated flatly.

“I could officially order you to.”

“If you do, I will leave Mithril.”

The solid image of Admiral Borda just sighed.

“Really, you’re just as stubborn as your father. He also caused me problems.”

“I’m sorry, uncle. But they’re important friends of mine. And-”

“You’re talking about Leonard, aren’t you?”

Borda had read her earlier, and she dropped her head.

“...yes. He appeared. And he was horrible. If we had to stand up to him, we would definitely need my power.”

“Granting that, is it really okay? We don’t know his intentions, and at the very least it seems he’s not on our side. If you face off with Leonard, it will be more painful for you, won’t it?”

“...”

“You still blame yourself for Bani.”

“...”

“Well, that’s enough... Anyway, there’s this affair with that traitor, Vincent Bruno.”

At that, she gave a restrained smile.

“Yes. That is currently in progress at present. He’s very far away...”



October 13th, 22:30 (Central European Time)
Southern Sicily, Mediterranean Sea
On the outskirts of Agrigento

The boss Capo, a physically well-built person, entered into the old barracks-styled room. Behind him were two people, young members of the family acting as guards. At the man’s signal, they bowed and stepped outside of the room.

Already Bruno had risen from the couch and greeted the boss, exchanging a warm embrace.

“Vincent Bruno. I wonder, have you gotten used to staying here?” asked Capo.

“Thank you, your Excellency. I am quite comfortable.”

Bruno always answered that way when he spoke in Italian.

“Just ‘Papa’ will do. I’ve always thought of you as my own son. Lately the number of people calling their fathers ‘Bossia’ has become less, same as the number of women who attend college has increased. It really is deplorable. However, it’s interesting as well.”

As he said this, a big grin spread across his face.

In truth, their ages weren’t so different that you could call Bruno and Capo father and son. Bruno was an American who was past 40, of medium stature with brown hair. He didn’t have any decidedly sharp features, but there was a kind of impudence and mischievousness in his blue eyes. He had left Marine Officer School, and had been one of the elite who served at the U.S. Department of Defense; but now he was a free agent. He also had money.

Until just a few weeks before, Bruno had been one of the staff of Mithril’s Operations Headquarters in Sydney. At the same time, he was a spy for “Amalgam”- he had been paid a large sum of money in return.

Even so, Bruno hadn’t thought of this as treason. It was fine since he was serving his country, but his being there had made it into a grandiose security company of sorts. It wasn’t that he hadn’t pledged his loyalty; selling information to other organizations was little more than a small side job.

Besides- “Interceptors of International Disputes”? There was no reason for great men to be associating with those claiming to be on the side of justice. World Peace! That would indeed be

wonderful. But that was just the wishful thinking of his fat old colleagues. Right now, since most of the world is starving, we won't eat as much.

However, only his spy activities counted. All he had done was give Mithril's password programs numerous times to the black market and change the assignment of two SRT personnel to the Western Pacific Fleet.

Because the scandal was still being smoothed over, he had no choice but to run away from Mithril. It was disappointing, but that was life, and it was better to think about profit.

He hadn't tried to rely on "Amalgam". It was easy to imagine such characters' unknown organization, as well as how they would deal with unnecessary traitors. Right now, both "Mithril" and "Amalgam" were the same kind of threat to him.

That's why Bruno decided first of all to approach the main body of the remote Sicily Mafia. The Barbara Family group was rapidly pouring weapons into North Africa and the Middle East from Europe, while at the same time stocking up on heroin. Bruno had also accommodated their weapons smuggling on more than one occasion. Clever humans walk this kind of tightrope carefully.

Their military power was equal to that of a small country. Of course, there were assortments of heavy weapons, armored cars and armaments, and in the end would probably not be used- they even had 2nd generation ASes. Because of this, not even Mithril could easily get their hands on them. Neither could Amalgam.

"Just relax. Everyone here is on my side," the Barbara leader, 'Capo di Capi', reassured Bruno. "I also have many supporters in the police, as well as the military. If by some chance men from those organizations were to come to this island, as if by magic, I would be informed of it."

"If they are dependable, that is."

Bruno had already informed the Barbara boss of the looks and countenance of men who would possibly come to capture him. Mithril's Mediterranean Squadron, "Partholon". He wasn't able to steal face shots of these SRT replacements, but they were in his head. If they infiltrated this scenario, it was clear that he would be dead within a day.

After chatting for five minutes, Barbara patted him on the shoulder.

"Anyway, enjoy tonight. It's my daughter's birthday, after all."

"If you will let me toast to your lovely daughter," said Bruno, lifting his wineglass in respect.

After the toast, Bruno parted with Capo and proceeded to the large hall.

Built in the 17th century, this glorious mansion had also undergone additional reconstruction many times, flooding its solemn interior with a sense of liveliness. The walls and ceiling were painted in a calming gold color, trimmed with complex lines. Elegant music filled the air, gourmet cuisine eaten, fine wine drunk, and many, many people were about... The banquet reached its final peak in the late hours of the night.

There were also many elegantly dressed women there. The genes of people from assorted nationalities remained here because people with various looks lived together. If there were dark-skinned beauties from the Mediterranean, then there were also blond-hair blue-eyed women from Northern Europe. If Bruno admired them, the girls would smile back and lightly wave at him.

"La bella Sicilia..." he mumbled to no one but himself.

Really, this is heaven. It's a good thing I came here...!

As Bruno wandered around the assembly moderately intoxicated, he was approached by a young woman.

She was beautiful. There was probably some oriental blood in her, and her eyes were slightly slanted. She wore her long, black hair in curls, and an exotic scent emanated from her. She wore a black floor-length dress which seemed to have a slight design at first glance, but on closer examination, the back was so boldly exposed it was almost startling. There were also slits up the sides so high that you could almost see above her hips.

Bruno's heart started to pound, aching with lust.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Sir?" she said in perfect English.

Although somewhat surprised, Bruno grinned back at her.

"Very much so. It's pretty nice here. When I arrived recently, I was pretty disgusted by the rows of shoddy-looking houses."

There were only a handful of luxurious places like this mansion in Sicily. Most of its residents led simple and peaceful lives.

For a joke, it wasn't funny, and she only returned a manufactured smile.

"You're an American, right? I lived over there for two years."

"Is that right? Guess that's why you can tell, isn't it?"

"Yes, kind of. You're from the city... and upper-class... well, something like that. And you smell different from the men over here."

"That's a problem, then. It's better not to stand out," he said, but didn't wipe the smile off of his face. The superior attitude of a city man. In her eyes, he didn't miss what seemed to be the secret innuendo that she had thrown out.

"Where did you live?"

"Baltimore."

“Eh?! That’s really close to where I lived.”

“Really? That’s unlikely, isn’t it?” She giggled and smiled.

“It’s true. Although it’s a very old story.”

With the power of alcohol and past memories spurring him on, Bruno made advances on the lady with great zeal. He talked about memories and local news. Of course, he didn’t forget to compliment the lady, either. She didn’t seem dissatisfied with the conversation, and nodded her head in the right places. She then made a proposal to him.

“What do you say we move to a quieter place? It’s too noisy in here.” Without a moment’s hesitation, Bruno agreed.

“Good idea. I’m staying in one of the rooms here. Shall we have another drink there?”

There was a bed there, and a bathroom. His companion also knew this, and without any apprehension, took his arm.

The two of them left the party. In the corridor that continued towards the annex there stood two of the family’s large soldiers. Each of them carried a gun over their shoulders and wore sunglass-type goggles equipped with night vision sensors.

“Signore, who is this woman?” asked one of the soldiers politely in a monotone voice.

The mafia had high-tech equipment these days. Even soldiers were receiving special training. The guns that these two had weren’t the Tommy guns you’d see in a gang film, but were Belgian-made new model sub-machine guns. Their compact box-shaped appearances made use of the reinforced plastic parts and as a result they were able to shoot their ammunition at a speed high enough that it could easily penetrate a normal bulletproof vest.

“Don’t ask such a boorish question,” said Bruno, taking the girl and passing by in front of the soldiers.

I'm glad that the guards are so strict, but at a time like this...? he thought and smiled bitterly.

"Sorry about that. They even treat VIPs that way," he whispered. She gave a surprised look and let out a giggle of excitement.

They arrived at his room before long, where he embraced her slender waist. She was a bit busty, but a dream come true for a man with taste in thin women.

"Now then, what should we do? By the way, I didn't ask what your name was..."

"Heh heh, wanna know?" she said, flashing him a mysterious smile.

Up close, he could see the details of her delicate skin. Young women were the best. Expectations and excitement overtook him, and Bruno snorted wildly.

"Of course I want to know. If I don't, then I can't call it out when the time comes." He drew her close to him, pulling open the slit in her evening gown to get a better look at her slender, shapely legs.

"Just my name? You don't want hear about anything else?"

"Of course I do. We'll take the other stuff slowly..."

"You want to know everything?"

"Yes, tell me everything. Everything, everything..."

"Fine. Well then, I'll tell you," and in the next moment, she got up. Bruno didn't understand.

She pushed him up against the wall, and he felt a violent pain run up through his front teeth- she had just thrust a very large pistol in his mouth. A Heckler & Koch .45 caliber. The model that the special forces first combat operations squad used. It was too rugged a weapon for a woman to have.

"Ga...? A...a?!"



She grasped the gun and faced Bruno, who was really surprised this time. She spoke.

“Listen up. My name is Melissa Mao. Mithril Operations, *Tuatha de Danaan*. Ground Force SRT unit. Rank: Sergeant Major. Call sign: Uruz 2...”

Impossible. The *Tuatha de Danaan*? The Western Pacific Fleet under the command of Testarossa or whatever her name was? Why in the world were they in a place like this...?!

“Ug... Aa...!”

“Just so you know... a few days ago, a superior officer that I cared about was killed because of you- so I’m dying to pull the trigger,” she said. Her eyes were cold, filled with a terrible hatred and thirst for blood.

He started to cry and shake his head as she held the large barrel of the gun in his mouth. Mao couldn’t help but get irritated.

Please, please don’t kill me, his eyes pleaded wholeheartedly. There wasn’t an ounce of dignity or hunger in them. If he had been a man with just a little more impudence, she would have been more than happy to pull the trigger. But seeing him in such a miserable state cooled her temper.

She withdrew the automatic from Bruno’s mouth, and changed her aim to his throat instead.

“Please don’t kill me. I beg you, please don’t...”

“Shut up. Be quiet.”

In the nearby corridor, mafia soldiers carrying radios were swarming. In the history of the mafia, you almost couldn’t find another family as vicious as the Barbara Family.

The leader of the Barbara Family appeared on the outside to be a friendly man of importance to the local community, but his real personality was actually very different. The boss was the type of man who would kidnap a judge who turned down his bribe, cut off his head, stuff rolls of banknotes into the mouth, and then send pictures of the grotesque scene to the family.

A mansion like this would definitely be guarded by many war-minded professionals whose consciousnesses were easily bought. And the equipment there was insanely high-tech. If her kidnapping objective cried out, Mao wouldn't be able to bring him in.

"Don't shoot me. I'll do whatever you want... please."

"Then shut up already."

"I'm shutting up. Right now. Please forgive me, I was an idiot. I never intended to become an enemy of Mithril, it was just a mere whim. I regret it now... please... oh, please, please..."

"Hey, what did I just say now? Geez..."

Mao pulled a pistol-shaped syringe out of her handbag with her free right hand, pressed it against the nape of Bruno's neck and pulled the trigger. In just about 10 seconds, Bruno, who was repeating "please" over and over again, dozed off and fell over unconscious.

"Good grief..." she muttered as she took off her fake eyebrows and wig, revealing her shaggy and very short black hair. She scratched her head.

In her ear she found the skull frequency with the ultra-small transmitter that she had prepared and relayed a transmission to her counterpart. "This is Uruz 2. Target acquired. Proceeding to neutralize the alarm."

She then took some kind of tool out of her handbag and began work on disabling the alarm. After she easily bypassed the circuit, she turned the alarm switch by the window off. The light, which normally should have turned red, remained green.

That should do it. If you tampered from the inside, an alarm such as this one was a piece of cake.

Mao then compromised the window, unfastening the lock and opening the frame.

From the small terrace on the fourth floor, you could see a stone annex as well as a high fence. Looking in that direction, one commanded a view of a gently sloping hillside underneath the dim moonlight. The light from some streetlamps off in the distance stretched faintly out into the horizon.

“Now then...” she said, leaning against the handrail. A refreshing night wind tickled her cheek. It was almost easy to forget the fact that she was in the middle of enemy territory.

“It’s like a painting, and you’re Hecate, goddess of the night,” said a voice right behind her.

From the other side of the open window stood a man in the transparent darkness of the corner. He was leaning up against a stone pillar with his arms folded in almost a cocky manner.

“How long have you been there?” asked Mao in a curt voice.

“Since that jerk stopped touching your ass,” he replied, stepping out of the darkness. The moonlight revealed the form of Kurz Weber, dressed in a tuxedo. He was a rather handsome man with blonde hair and blue eyes, and right now there seemed to be an air of nobility about him dressed up as he was in rich clothes.

“I told you, didn’t I? You definitely look good in that dress.”

“Of course I do. I seduced him with one shot. But I won’t be wearing these kinds of clothes again, sorry. I look like one of those stupid women at the Oscars or something.”

He approached her in a very elegant gate, and whispered in her ear, “That’s not true. I think it suits you veeery well.”

“For someone like you with perverted tastes.”

“No really, you look great. Like a mysterious loner, the way the back is exposed... Did you know? Hecate was also the goddess of vengeance. And that certainly fits you tonight...”

“Are you drunk?”

“Si, Signorina. I’m intoxicated by your charm, in the words of a poet. Heh heh heh heh...”

“Give me a break.”

Kurz came up behind her and hugged her shoulders firmly but gently. The faint scent of whatever citrus cologne he was using drifted in the air. If she had been off her guard, she could have stayed almost trance-like in that position, but-

Unfortunately for Mao, the mission came first. She bent her head down and snapped it back with great deal of force. The back of her head hit the bridge of Kurz’s nose, causing a blast of pain down his neck.

“Bu-..!!”

“Alright now. We have work to do... work.”

“Owww...why the hell’d you do that?!”

“Be quiet and pay attention. How about you wake up to the situation? There are some scary looking characters parading around here.”

“It’s such a sad reality...”

“Just take out the equipment already.”

“Che-”

With tears in his eyes and pressing his nose, Kurz reached for the daypack he had placed in the corner of the terrace. The day before, he had slipped some equipment in with the decorations and food ingredients for the party. Having to keep up with preparations as well as sneaking in as a party attendant had been pretty tough. Since it was possible that there were still spies in Mithril, they had to carry this mission out completely on their own. There hadn’t been any objections by the Department of Intelligence or the North Atlantic Submarine Fleet. They had been able to infiltrate this unfamiliar land thanks to the influence of their superior officer Lt.

Commander Kalinin, Mao's own excellent computer skills, and Kurz's connections from his mercenary days.

Kurz took a very small winch and a wire out of the bag, and then both he and Mao carried the unconscious Bruno out on the terrace. While they were doing so, Kurz mumbled complaints under his breath.

"Really, that was a cold thing to do. And after I went and shook myself free from a beautiful young woman who was keeping me when I said I'd meet her behind the party hall..."

"A beautiful young woman?"

"That's right. A multi-millionaire widow from Milan. Ohh, the size of the diamond around her neck... the mood was so nice."

"You're lying."

"It's true. I made her slit eyes become misty, and she went so far as to say 'I would marry as long as it was with you.'"

"Is that right?"

He fastened the winch to the hand railing. There weren't any security guards to be seen in the courtyard, probably because Kurz had knocked them out with a stun gun before climbing up. As Kurz began to climb down into the thick shrubbery on the ground, Mao stopped him.

"Hold on. I'll go first."

"It's not like I care or anything, but how come?"

She didn't answer him. If he knew that she wasn't wearing any underwear right now, the pervert would be overjoyed. Since the upper part of the dress was pretty thin, and there was barely any back at all, it had made it impossible to wear undergarments. However, since the slits were pretty high, if Kurz were below her and a strong wind were to blow, well...

He would be able to see everything.

"Hey, is something wrong? Why?"

“Shut up, already- it doesn’t matter, does it?”

She took off her high heels and hurriedly got on the handrail. Without much difficulty, she nimbly climbed down into the bushes on the ground. Next they lowered Bruno down using the winch, and Kurz climbed down last of all.

“How’s the route to the car?”

“Won’t be a problem. All the guards around here are knocked out.”

“Good. Shall we make our exit now?”

If they could make it to the attendant parking lot, then all that would be left would be for them to put Bruno in the trunk of the Ferrari they came in and then ride away in triumph.

Kurz carried the limp body of Bruno over his shoulder. Mao, holding a silenced pistol in one hand, walked out to the attendant parking lot when-

“Signore!” cried a woman’s husky voice from the courtyard.

“Geh...?”

“Signore Kalius! Please wait!”

From the direction of the annex ran a middle-aged woman wearing some very flashy jewelry. She was a rather large and well-rounded lady. She was neither lacking in the size of her bust nor her stomach, and whenever she moved, her figure bounced up and down just like a large rubber ball.

“Don’t tell me... that she’s your ‘beautiful young widow’...?”

“Eh? N-no... it’s not...”

“Besides that... ‘Kalius’?”

“Just an alias. It was the name of the old man who worked at the pharmacy in my dad’s town. When I stayed during the summers, he would let me play. Why there are Japanese Toy Model tanks and even mountains that have that name, I don’t-”

“Kalius-!” she cried, rushing straight into him. She clung to the now dismayed Kurz, who was shouting “Women are crazy!” in a furious voice. She didn’t seem aware of their situation, what with Kurz carrying an unconscious Bruno over his shoulder and the presence of a very stunned Mao.

“Ah...Kalius, my love. How I’ve looked for you! You left me! Where are you going?”

“No, well, uhh...”

“I apologize if I said anything that offended you. What a sensitive man you are! But I understand- I can see the grief hidden deep within those blue eyes of yours! Why don’t we talk some more? Love is like a plant- it takes root, but it takes time before the flower blooms. But I’m sure that we will be able to understand each other. That’s why, that’s why...!” she cried, her voice getting louder. Mao and Kurz went into a panic.

“Hey, hey now Miss, could you keep it down right now? Okay? Just give me-”

“Please, Kalius! Please don’t leave me here-!! Per favoooreee! Ah! Waa- a-a-a-ah! Aaahhh!!”

“No, even crying like that I-”

“Will you shut her up...! If someone hears her wailing like that...”

If someone were to hear her, the rush would probably take 30 seconds at most. But there was plenty of time until her voice reached the nearest people.

Just then the form of a man dressed in black and carrying a sub-machine gun appeared from around the corner about 20 meters away.

“What’s all the commotion about?! ...ah-”

There stood a large woman crying, as well as a young woman holding a pistol. And also- a pretty boy carrying their VIP

American guest, who appeared to be passed out. When he realized what was going on, the security guard went pale.

“Intruders! Intrudeeeers!” he cried out, drawing his sub-machine gun at about the same time that Mao pulled the trigger of her pistol.

She hit the mafia guy in the shoulder and the side, who aimed at ground as he fell forward, pulling the trigger. The muzzle point lit up, and clouds of dust rose from the earth.

The sound of the sub-machine gunfire drowned out the cries of the widow.

An alarm that sounded very much like a patrol car’s siren went off throughout the premises.

From the main house and annex, as well as the guard’s station and guesthouse, mafia soldiers started pouring out in an avalanche. The sound of successive gunshots as well as excited yelling rang out in the night. The ferocious barking of attack Dobermans could be heard as they were released. Numerous spotlights chased after the intruders.

All the noise around the antique mansion made it seem like a nightclub.

“Dammit!” Mao cursed amid the incessant downpour of bullets. After hiding behind a stone wall about waist-high, she cried out through half-teary eyes “And this time I thought we’d be able to leave elegantly, too! But no, we end up pulling out the guns after all! Why does it always end up like this?!”

“That’s just the breaks,” refuted Kurz, rushing behind the wall at the last minute. He was out of breath from running around while carrying Bruno’s heavy body over his shoulder.

“It’s because I’m too nice... to put it politely, I was just saying this and that to compliment her- but that lady, she was

serious. But I kind of understand her reasons, what with her husband's early death and all-

"Can you be sentimental some other time?! We're probably gonna die out here!"

Incidentally, when the gunfight suddenly erupted the aforementioned widow had fainted where she stood. Mao and Kurz had abandoned her, making a break for it across the grounds and running until they had reached the corner of a large flower garden, when they hit a dead end.

"Behind us there's a three meter high wall, and in front of us there are about 100 mobsters. There's nowhere to run! Not to mention we only brought one Socom pistol and a stun gun!"

"But it's good, too, isn't it? Those guns were pretty expensive, and they hadn't been used in actual combat. Weren't you complaining recently that they were a 'waste of money'?"

"That doesn't make it any better!"

-But she was cut off mid-answer by a spray of enemy fire around them. The rock fragments and black earth blowing up around them came raining down on their heads.

"Ah, shit!"

From their hiding place, she aimed the pistol in question and shot off five rounds rapid-fire. She hit a couple of Dobermans that were making a rush at them, and they fell to the ground, writhing.

"Aww, poor things."

"I didn't know. Would you have rather been their dinner?"



“You have a point- whoa oh!”

Just a few meters away, a man made a jump for them from the other side of their shelter. Kurz fired, and a sharp bolt of lightning crackled through the air. The man fell to the ground.

“Damn, I wish I had a rifle. I can see a guy that looks like their commander or something in window of the main building...”

Kurz definitely would have been able to fell the commander from there. His name might suggest that he was “short” or something like that, but when he had a rifle, no matter how far off his enemy, he could reach him.

“Well, taking out their commander now would be pointless.”

“But we’re in a predicament here. We’re about to be surrounded,” said Kurz, switching out the battery in his stun gun.

“It’s your fault. If this is how it’s gonna end, then we should do something about this guy before we get killed...” Mao changed out the cylinder in her gun and looked down at Bruno, who was sleeping peacefully.

“You mean kill him? Even after we came here to kidnap him?”

“Just kidding. I just wish we could.”

Right after she said that, she heard a new voice come in through her earpiece.

“Don’t give up just yet, Uruz 2.”

“Eh...?”

“Looks like I made it in time. Keep your heads down.”

“What? You’re coming over here? Sou-”

But a deafening roar and a sudden blast cut off the rest of Mao’s words. The back wall exploded, scattering flames and fragments violently.

Someone had blown up the wall from somewhere outside of the premises.

The black smoke from the explosion had temporarily made the field of visibility zero. One could hear the voices of the mafia guards shouting and running into each other, as well as the sound of haphazard gunfire.

“...?!”

“Behind the wall, four o’clock. Run!”

The smoke stung their eyes. Holding back the tears, Mao tugged on Kurz’s shoulder and ran as she was told in the direction of four o’clock- behind them and to the right. Almost a two-meter wide portion of the tall wall had collapsed, blown up by a bomb or something from the other side.

As they stepped over the rubble and made their way to the outside of the wall, they heard the sound of braking come from the other side of the smoke.

“This way!”

They then saw an old Fiat parked on the road that encircled the estate. It was a cream-colored square coupe, and looked as if four people would be very cramped inside of it. It was a small car.

Mao and Kurz did a double take when they saw who the driver was.

“Sousuke?!”

The one rushing towards their position in the car was their colleague, Sousuke Sagara.

His black hair was a mess and he wore a serious look on his face. Over his black combat clothes he wore an olive-colored flight jacket.

It was only natural that Mao and Kurz were surprised. Sousuke had not been included in this mission, and was supposed to be in Japan right now.

“What are you doing?” said Kurz as he flung Bruno into the backseat. “You have midterms today, don’t you?!”

“Affirmative. However, your escape route has been changed. I was ordered by the Lieutenant Commander to deliver that message and to help you escape.”

“Changed, you say?”

“The sea route bound for Marseilles has been cancelled. It seems the captain of the fishing boat that we hired was hospitalized for alcohol abuse. Some strings were pulled, and we’ll take-”

Enemy bullets pierced through the smoke and shattered the Fiat’s rearview mirror.

“Fini...?”

“...we’ll take an air-route from the NATO air-force base to Turkey. There is a shuttle flight that always goes out that way. Tomorrow morning at the post office in Catania, we will get IDs and directives from the US armed forces, as well as marine uniforms-”

“Save the explanations for later, just get us out of here!”

“Roger,” he yelled at Mao, who was trying to get into the passenger-side seat when Sousuke stepped on the accelerator. The engine groaned and the rear wheels spun out, throwing up pebbles and dirt. The Fiat took off as if something had kicked it from behind.

“...whoa! Isn’t that dangerous?!” Mao yelled as she checked the rear. Her expression changed as the hem of her skirt fluttered wildly around her.

“The enemy is also dangerous,” Sousuke replied. “Even so...” he trailed off, giving Mao a side-glance.

“It changes into a swimsuit? Were you planning on swimming to Marseilles?”

“No! It’s not a swimsuit; it’s used in high society!”

“Is that right?” Sousuke cut the wheel sharply. The car tilted wide left, causing Mao to hit her head on the passenger side

window. The road was unpaved and extremely uneven; one would expect it to tear up this type of everyday car.

“Your driving is horri-...!”

“No problem.”

“By the way, Mao- what are we gonna do about the Ferrari we left in the parking lot?” Kurz asked.

“Leave me alone. It’s a rental, anyway.”

“But the satellite communications equipment and whatnot is still in the trunk...”

“What?! You idiot...!”

“I set up some explosives, too. I press this switch, and 15 seconds later... BOOM. I can take care of it right now, but...”

They had abandoned communications equipment that had the passwords entered in them. Sitting next to a now speechless Mao, Sousuke asked in a restrained voice.

“What should we do? Turn around?”

“...no way to, is there?! Right now-”

Shuun! The sound cut through the air just above their heads, bullets flying everywhere.

About 100 meters back on the road behind them was a black 4WD Cherokee coming straight at them. Men with the upper half of their bodies hanging out from the sunroof were shooting at them with their sub-machine guns nonstop.

Crack!

They heard the dry sound of bullet impacts. Holes appeared in the Fiat’s rear windshield, and shattered pieces of glass fell all over the inside of the car.

“Turn around in this situation?! Press the detonation switch! It’s okay. Blow it up!”

“Roger... and-”

Kurz pressed the button on a remote switch about the size of a cell phone.

“Okay, it worked. Farewell, Ferrari. Hello, Fiat.”

“This car isn’t a piece of garbage.”

Sousuke held on tight to the struggling wheel and stepped on the gas, but nothing could help the car’s lack of power. However, the pursuing 4WD had more than twice the power of the Fiat.

“They’re gaining on us.”

And in an instant, the black car was threateningly close by. When Mao realized that there was a big curve up ahead, she jumped halfway out of the Fiat’s sunroof.

“Dammit...!”

Clutching her gun tight with both hands, she aimed and fired. The enemy gunman was hit and fell into the car.

She fired again and sparks flew off of the body of the Cherokee. It seemed to have bulletproof coating that her bullets couldn’t penetrate. Nevertheless, she obstinately kept firing until the magazine was empty.

With just ten bullets left for her .45, she focused on the driver’s seat. The enemy’s bulletproof glass didn’t altogether stop the bullets- a number of small cracks developed, and the surface of the windshield turned white. The sharp curve was close.

Knowing what she needed to do, she loaded up her last clip and fired again. She shot three bullets into each of the headlights, knocking them out.

“We’re turning!”

Immediately following, the Fiat grated against the bank and lunged into the turn. The body of the car leaned wide and the right-side tires rose off of the ground. At the same time, Mao, Sousuke, and Kurz moved to the right side of the car-

“Whoa-”

The car fell back down, its tires on the ground. The Fiat, now back under control, had somehow managed to make the turn. Shuddering like a baby on tottering legs, the weak car took off for a second time.

On the other hand, with its front windshield cracked and both headlights busted out, the driver of the pursuing car didn't see the turn. Without slowing down much at all, the Cherokee went over the curb, running the front wheels up the sharply inclining slope that ran along the roadside.

The black car, along with the sound of the high-pitched squeal of the engine, rose up into the night sky.

Their flight was of short duration. It rolled over on its left side, smashing along the ground.

It turned over two or three times, scattering various-size parts and accessories. In an instant the Fiat was far away from the seriously damaged and now blazing 4WD.

“Poor things. If they'd had wings, they could've flown, heh heh...” Mao said, saluting them by throwing a kiss.

“Man, today's been like a spy movie...” mumbled Kurz.

The Fiat swerved off of the back road and up onto paved road.

To the right and left side of the road the hilly landscape nearby was drawn in gently sloping curves. There was very little oncoming traffic, owing to the night. One minute, two minutes. The car was doing favorably well on its night ride.

“Is it over already?”

“That was almost too easy...”

Then they saw the light from a pair of headlights come over a hill straight behind them. It was being handled very roughly and coming very fast. It looked like they were in for a fresh chase.

“Is there just one?”

“Just one is bad enough. I’m already out of...”

“No, look,” said Sousuke.

At first there was just one car. However, further down the road the angle changed, and as they got a better view over the hill, they saw another pair of headlights. And another. And another. The line of lights continued successively without interruption, until-

“Th... thirteen...”

Kurz’s jaw dropped.

“Sousuke, can’t you go any faster?!”

“It’s already at its limit. There’s too much weight,”

Sousuke replied calmly. This car was just a compact city car with no power; of course it hadn’t been made to handle four adults in a car chase. But they didn’t have any weapons. If by some miracle they managed to escape, there were some weapons and ammunition hidden in a country church. But they were still a long way away from that church.

Mao looked back at Bruno, who was snoring easily in the backseat, with a serious stare.

“Well, it seems we could kill him and throw him out...”

“Yeah. That seems to have become a good idea all of a sudden...” Kurz replied. They were fairly serious in their talk, and the problematic Vincent Bruno didn’t hear a thing.

“You mean to make the car lighter?” Sousuke asked.

“That’s right. If we don’t, they’re gonna catch up to us.”

“In that case, that man’s weight alone won’t be enough. I put some weapons under the backseat that you can throw away. There’s an assault rifle, shotgun, disposable rocket launcher, and high-power grenades. Since all of it together weighs about 40 kilograms-”

“What did you say?!”

They shoved Bruno over, struggled around in the cramped quarters for a few seconds, and then lifted up the backseat. Inside were those pesky weapons. There was a German assault rifle, an Italian shotgun, and an American rocket. There was also a hearty supply of heavy arms that could easily pierce bulletproof glass.

“Why didn’t you tell us before, idiot?!” yelled both Mao and Kurz in unison, their faces turning red in anger.

“I didn’t?”

“No, you didn’t! ...oh, for heaven’s sake!”

They cut short their verbal abuse, took up the small arms, noisily cocked the levers, and verified that the ammunition was taken care of in each. Kurz broke out the rear windshield, which was already full of holes, and took aim with his rifle. Mao went back up through the sunroof and leveled out her shotgun, now filled with slug bullets.

“All right, shall we get this party rolling again?”

The cold touch of the steel settled within her, and the sensation put her in a trance.

“Are you bastards ready?!”

“Anytime.”

“Any place.”

The enemy cars got closer.

Soon they would be there.

Yeah. I like this kind of ride after all, thought Mao.

“Rock and Roll!!” she yelled in a voice that could have beaten down a storm, and immediately started firing.



“This is the first time I’ve ever been disgraced like this!” yelled the leader of the Barbara family in outrage. “This was my daughter’s birthday! The guests were checked, yet these burglars have managed to shake off my soldiers- and are still escaping even as we speak!”

“I’m very sorry, Capo di Capi,” the head of security apologized humbly. Almost half of the vehicles that had been parked in the parking lot of the mansion were out in pursuit of the burglars.

“However, they won’t escape this time. We’ve got them surrounded. We will get Mr. Bruno back, and make those bandit bastards suffer...”

“I don’t give a damn about Bruno!” said Barbara, finally voicing his real opinion. “That guy’s just a nuisance. Kill him with the others, I don’t care! Use any means! Throw the ASes at ‘em! Anyone that gets in the way, even if it’s a bunch of little girls, you crush them like worms!!”

“Th... the ASes, too?”

“That’s right. I bought those robots for exactly this kind of situation. Make all of the soldiers move out now! Got it? Kill them! I want to see those bastards’ heads lined up in front of me!”

“But if we use the ASes, the state government will surely-”

“I don’t wanna hear it! If those bastards escape, I’ll twist off your head!!”

“Understood. Please excuse me, sir...!”

This was probably just military habit. The head of security stood straight up, then broke into a headlong run for the guard center.

“Hmph...!” Barbara snorted, watching the retreating figure from behind. He laboriously took out a cigar and lit it. He had thought it would calm him down a little, but it didn’t help at all.

When he thought about how he had been humiliated, he felt as if his head would explode in anger.

Before he had ascended to his current position, he had always dealt out punishment to his enemies himself. It didn't matter what kind of people they were, he would kill them and their entire family. Of course, he had even killed little children as well; but he had never felt any regret for it. He did it all in order to instill fear and hesitation into his enemy. He made sure that their children witnessed this spectacle with their own eyes.

That's right. He had to cheer up his daughter. His very delicate daughter must have received a terrible shock.

Barbara reconsidered, took a guard and started to leave the parking lot. There was an array of the guests' high-class cars: Jaguars, Lotuses, Porsches, Rolls-Royces, and Lamborghinis. Taking long strides, he started to pass by a cherry-red Ferarri-F40, when...

He heard an electronic beeping sound, coming from the Ferrari next to him.

“...?”

In a moment, the electric tone got higher. Without thinking, Barbara stopped in his tracks and looked into the Ferrari, which was now emitting a different sound.

Inside he found five kilograms of plastic explosives, which exploded a moment later.

The blast reduced the car's body to pieces in an instant. The gasoline caught fire and became a ball of flames, sweeping through the surrounding perimeter like a terrible and destructive storm. The hood was blown off, splitting the air like a Frisbee and hitting the wall of the main building some 50 meters away.

Barbara, however, noticed nothing except his own death.

Unfortunately, the kill orders he issued remained in effect for some time after.



Same Time

Choufu-shi, Tokyo, Japan

Jindai High School

Of course, Kaname Chidori had no way of knowing about the shoot 'em up game going on halfway around the world.

She had long black hair and was wearing a sailor uniform. While she had a vivacious appearance, she also somewhat carried the air of an old landlord. Her eyes had a sharp beauty to them without being flashy. Her proportions weren't such that she could be a super-model, but she didn't really have any flaws, either.

A peaceful high school in peaceful Japan. The weather was also peaceful, with clear skies.

Was this complete tranquility thanks to "him" not being here, since yesterday's tests were also completely peaceful?

Just before the morning's first tests began, Kaname finished her preparations. In the seat next to her, one of her classmates answered her cell phone. Kaname overheard the conversation.

"Ah, hello? It's me... yeah, I'm about to take a test. Yeah, kinda. Ha ha ha... really. It sucks... but, I'll do my best. Even Hiro knew...? Yeah... yeah."

She was probably talking to her boyfriend. That's right, she said he's a high school student.

"Yeah... what am I doing right now? ...you were up all night? ...ah ha ha, sorry. That's right, you had a report due, didn't

you? ...yeah ...yeah ...I know. I have to try hard...” she said in an enchanted voice different from normal.

“*Hmph, she sure is conceited, isn’t she...*” Kaname mumbled to herself, her inferiority complex full throttle.

Since early this morning she had been steeped in the world of the girl and her somewhere-else boyfriend.

Really, could she be more shameless...?! She thought to herself along with other thoughts. But she would have been lying if she said that she wasn’t jealous of having a boyfriend like that.

Having someone who would call her before she took the test because he wanted to hear her voice... what did it feel like to have someone of the opposite sex like that? What kind of conversation would she be having with what kind of guy right now?

If I had that kind of relationship with someone, and we lived in different places- I would also make those kinds of faces, and talk in a small, cute voice like that, wouldn’t I?

For example, if, hypothetically, he were my boyfriend? That’s a little beyond believability, isn’t it...

Kaname was musing over these small thoughts when she heard the voice of her classmate, Kyouko Tokiwa.

“Hey, Kaname.”

“Huh?”

“How did you do on today’s math test? I bet I did the worst on it... *sniff*”

“Ahh... sorry, then. I think I did alright.”

She avoided the question like any person who does perfect on a test would.

She probably almost made a perfect grade on the English exam. She might get a modest grade in Classical Literature. She

definitely did perfect on the Chemistry exam. And she certainly did perfect in Math II.

And this test, too. Even though she wasn't particularly strong in Science and Mathematics, she had the confidence that she could do perfect on it, as well.

Tessa's prediction had become reality. Ever since she had been awakened as one of the "Whispered", the amount of knowledge she possessed had suddenly increased.

It wasn't that it felt creepy or anything. Without rousing her true feelings, she just turned her head.

Kaname didn't feel as if she had "become smart" about strange things. Now she was able to explain in detail the chemical formula for the conductive shape memory polymer used in the AS's propulsion system, as well as how to make it. On top of being able to talk about the principle of the single-layer element that was used in the quantum results, she could also suggest unique and practical applications for it that no one else had noticed yet.

But for her, it didn't feel any different from talking about the way mackerel miso is cooked. But people in society wouldn't know that if they garnished the miso with shredded ginger, the clean flavor would completely contrast that of the food.

...that level of conversation.

It was always that way, talking about watching dumb comedy shows and laughing out loud with her friends.

Even though she was worried about many things, she didn't think too deeply on these problems since it was just depressing. The trouble was that there seemed to be people out there who wanted to find out how to make this delicious miso soup by any means necessary, but-

"Ah- that's strange," said Kyouko, and without knowing why, Kaname gathered her courage.

“Kaname, your grades on the recent finals and math were at the top, weren’t they?”

“No, well... it was just luck.”

“What kind of study methods are you using? Or are you cheating? Whichever it is, tell me.” Her large eyes lit up behind her dragonfly glasses.

“It’s a secret. Or as he would say, ‘You aren’t qualified to know.’ Ha ha ha”

“*pfft* ...speaking of which, it doesn’t look like Sagara is coming today either, does it?” said Kyouko, bringing up the subject because of Kaname’s impersonation.

Even though they were in the middle of the important mid-term exams, Sousuke was absent from school. Up until now there had been times where he would suddenly disappear for two or three days, but this was the first time he had missed during tests.

“Guess not. Does that idiot not care whether or not he fails? Adding that to his already problematic behavior...”

She may have said it in a nonchalant fashion, but truthfully, Kaname was worried. He didn’t think enough about his situation as a student. No matter how easygoing this school was, the teachers probably wouldn’t stay silent on the subject forever.

“It really is a problem, huh? Ah-ha...”

“Did you try calling his cell? If you threaten him, he might come,” Kyouko said, gladly taking out her new phone. She wanted to use it for something since she had just bought it recently.

“It’s impossible. I’m never able to get a hold of him in times like this. More than likely, he’s off in some fields or deep in the mountains somewhere fishing or something like that.”

“You don’t know for sure though, right? It might go through unexpectedly.”

“I said it was impossible. Just quit it already.” Kaname negligently stopped, but Kyouko continued on, putting the phone up to her ear. She was silent for a little while, quietly waiting for an answer.

“...see? Can’t get through, can you?”

“Hmm...”

“That’s how it always is. I only get the answering machine service. Really, when it comes to him-”

“It picked up.”

“Huh?”

“See,” replied Kyouko, handing the phone over.

Next to her, Kaname’s predecessor was still unchanged, whispering words of love to her boyfriend over the phone. She could somehow see her own form superimposed on the girl’s. Feeling a sort of groundless embarrassment, Kaname hesitatingly took the phone and half-doubtedly answered.

“...hello?”

“Chidori?! What is it!?” yelled a far-off voice. There was a lot of crackling and harsh noise mixed in, but it was unmistakably Sousuke.

“Ah... Sousuke. Where are you?”

“Canicatti!”

“Can cutting?...what?”

What kind of reason is that? Just what is he planning to do? She also worried about the random time lag it was taking to receive his replies.

“Hey... what about the tests since yesterday? Did you forget?”

“I didn’t forget, but there was urgent business! It couldn’t be helped!!”

“Yes it could. Just as an example, what about the three hours I spent teaching you Classical Literature, which is your worst subject? The test is about to start.”

“I’m... sorry about that!” The noise got loud for a moment.

“‘I’m sorry’, ‘I’m sorry’, really...! And another thing! I lied to the teacher about what happened to the car that you tore up!”

This was the explanation that Kaname gave to Eri Kagurazaka:

“He wanted to do you a favor by making some adjustments to your car. However, he became sick halfway through, left school early and went by himself to his family hospital. He said ‘When I’ve recovered, I will come straight back and return her car to normal,’ and wanted you to be patient for just a few days.”

...is what she said. It was a pretty pathetic explanation, but Eri, being the good sort of person she was and with tears in her eyes, said “Is that right... this is the first I’ve heard of his chronic illness, but... if it’s like you say, I’ll just wait and not make a problem out of it.”

For now, the piecemeal car had been left behind the school building covered by a vinyl tarp.

“Do you understand what I had to go through!?”

For a short while, there was no reply. Five seconds, six seconds, seven seconds. Just as she started to get annoyed, she heard a short answer.

“I understand!”

“No, you don’t! You’re not sincere at all! What do you think is the reason for other people’s charity!? Really! When it comes to you, why are you always, ALWAYS causing problems for others- hey, are you listening!?”

“Yes! I’m list-”

Right then, there was a thunderous roar. Then came a jarring and violent shaking noise, followed by high-pitched interference. Then there was a beat, and then Sousuke continued.

“I’m listening! -they’re coming straight at us!!” Sousuke shouted. Kaname was taken aback by his strange remark.

“Huh? Wh-what did you say?”

“No, it was something on this end! I’m in the middle of driving right now!!” A moment later the sound of something like a large firework launching could be heard over the phone.





To the distant land of Italy - The sound of a phone connected with Sousuke, Kaname remembers that she was somehow embarrassed.

Same Time
Northern Sicily
On the Outskirts of Canicatti

The Mafia Benz had been hit by the rocket in its tracks, shot up into the air and was gushing flames.

The burning car was skidding along the stone-paved road backwards when the pursuing car coming from behind hit it, causing it to go into an impressive spin. Sousuke took no notice of the pursuing vehicles as they became entangled and plunged into the desolate marketplace.

The place that they went into was an old town with stone buildings built next to each other.

The Fiat raced down the street late into the night at high speed without any hesitation at all.

“That’s number ten! Three more left!” yelled Mao, tossing the disposable rocket launcher away. Her dress was covered in soot and torn here and there, leaving her pretty much half-naked.

“Was that the last rocket just now!?” yelled Kurz as he changed the cylinder out on his rifle. He had cast off his tuxedo jacket, and his blonde hair was in disarray.

“Affirmative. We’re down to only grenades now!”

“Dammit.”

“Fire at their grill! I’ll keep the shooter’s head down!”

Another one of their pursuers fired at them. Kurz and Mao returned fire. In the middle of all of this chaotic noise, over a satellite circuit- Kaname repeated herself, oblivious to what was going on.

“Hello? In the middle of driving- what, a car?”

“Affirmative!” shouted Sousuke over his radio headset as he roughly commanded the steering wheel.

“That’s dangerous. Talking on a cell phone while driving is against the law, you know? Not to mention the fact that you’re a high school student. Why don’t you stop just this once?”

“I can’t do that, either! If I stop, I won’t be able to take the make-up exams!”

“Huh?”

His Fiat was now in a wretched state, full of bullet holes and scratches, a running piece of scrap, so to speak. However, there wasn’t much difference between the car’s engine and its passengers, as they both seemed to need a miracle.

“Well, make-up exams can’t be helped, can they? But are you seriously going to risk your credits? This is different from all the times you’ve skipped before.”

“It’s a mission! It can’t be helped!”

The Fiat crashed through a mountain of vegetable baskets that had been arranged by the side of the road. He slid the back wheels around to go up on the sidewalk and towards a small alleyway. The enemy persistently followed them. The sturdy BMW mowed down cases of sake bottles, a garbage bin, some bikes and a cart, and in a moment was pressing closer to them.

“But you can’t explain your circumstances to the teacher, can you? If you lose your credits, you won’t be able to move up a grade, will you? You won’t be in third year.”

“If you put it like that, I guess not!”

Gunfire, gunfire, gunfire.

The walls of the winding alleyway rushed by front to back at fierce speed. The pursuing vehicle hit its front bumper up against the back of the Fiat. The steering wheel struggled and the frame groaned.

“What’ll you do if you fail? The rest of us will graduate before you.”

“That’s a problem!”

The engine of the enemy car was emitting smoke. It seemed that Kurz’s rifle had been effective. The vehicle wobbled, slipped and went into a spin. It hit the stone wall and moved no more.

“Two more to go!”

The Fiat rushed out of the alleyway. One of the enemy vehicles got there before it, cut across the street and came up close behind them.

“...it’s a problem for me, too.”

“What did you say!?”

Mao and Kurz yelled out something, firing the shotgun and rifle.



“I couldn’t hear you! Could you say it aga-”

They concentrated all of their fire on the enemy's front wheels. The wheel cap blew off and bounced over the surface of the road. Up ahead was a T-bone curve, which they followed. Sousuke cut the wheel quickly.

The pursuing vehicle, now with its front tires blown out, flew up onto the sidewalk without even attempting the turn. It plunged into a vacant restaurant, scattering broken glass fragments and dust everywhere. The shrill sound of its horn pierced the night.

"Just one more!" Mao yelled.

"What's going on? Who's there?"

"Don't worry about it! Anyway- what's a problem!?"

Grinding its tires, the last one came rushing up from behind. It was a very large pick-up truck, and it caught up without passing them. Keeping alongside the Fiat, the truck rammed into it violently.

"Oh, nevermind... are you preoccupied by any chance?"

"No, it's just noisy around here!"

There was a strong impact, followed by a violent shock. The little car scraped up against the wall.

The truck rammed the Fiat a second time. The rear bumper had fallen halfway off and was scraping along the pavement, emitting sparks so bright they would be painful to look at.

"Sousuke?"

"It's just noisy around here! The next one's already taken care of!"

"Ah, I see... you know, sometimes I get the feeling that you don't take what I'm saying seriously, Sousuke."

"I'm always serious! Even now!"

"Sousuke, hit the brakes!" yelled Kurz, pulling the pin from a grenade and throwing it into the bed of the truck beside them.

Sousuke reacted immediately, squealing the breaks. The Fiat stopped and jerked forward, but the enemy truck kept going.

“Get down!”

“Hello?”

Immediately after, the deserted hand-grenade in the bed of the truck blew up.

The fragments flew into the Fiat as well, cutting holes in the car here and there as if the body were made of paper.

The back half of the truck was destroyed, causing it to lose its balance. Black smoke started pouring from it as it went skidding into the town plaza, crashing into the edge of the water fountain located in the center. Even so, the truck lost none of its momentum and its body went flying, turning sideways and going into a spin, falling into the middle of the fountain- There was a large splashing sound, followed by the scream of ripping metal.

“...”

They quickly stopped the Fiat in front of the Plaza. Sousuke and the others looked in the direction of the fountain, and saw the blackened truck skewered upside-down upon a spire-like sculpture.

The burnt wheels were facing up towards the sky, turning over and over and spewing smoke.

“Now that’s art for you. Would you call that a fusion of modern with classical?” Kurz made a rectangular shape with his fingers, framing the scene.

“And that’s zero... even though, well... it wasn’t very pretty,” groaned Mao, as she fixed the chest-area of her dress which was slipping down.

The mafia soldiers crawled out from the open door and kicked up the water. They argued about what had happened, and then ran off.

This was the last of the pursuing vehicles for now.

Sousuke fixed his radio headset, and hurriedly started calling out to the other end.

“Chidori. We’re finished. Now... what were you talking about?”

There was no reply for a while, only an ill-tempered silence.

“...I don’t remember.”

“Huh?”

“Anyway, just come to school as soon as possible.”

“Okay, I underst-”

“Idiot.”

The voice cut off. The satellite circuit communication was terminated from the abandoned end in Japan. Sousuke turned the radio switch off and breathed a deep sigh.

They had gotten the best of the enemy vehicles, but they couldn’t relax yet. It was about time for the town’s police to come out. Since they didn’t have a substitute car, they decided it would be best to leave the town while they were still in the beat-up little car.

It was fairly shot, but somehow managed to keep going.

“Anyway, we need to go east,” said Mao. “We’ll throw the car away in front of a town called Delia. There we’ll pick up a better car.”

“What about the means of supplying one?” asked Sousuke.

“The best idea is to steal one, of course. If we turn off of the main road and drive all night, we should reach Catania before tomorrow afternoon.”

“Ahh, an all-nighter, huh? Geez,” complained Kurz. Next to him Vincent Bruno still slept, talking in a muffled voice. He muttered the name of some unknown woman, loosely grinning.

“He really is a cocky one, isn’t he? You sure this guy’s a spy?”

“That’s what the Lieutenant Commander and Tessa said. He also admitted to it,” Mao answered, looking into the cracked rearview mirror. She wiped the soot off of her excited face, and tidied up her messy hair.

“I could cry,” Kurz groaned. He pulled off the butterfly necktie that was scratching his neck and threw it out the window.

There was only the clatter of the shaking car frame and the sound of the tires kicking up pebbles.

Their car ran along in the middle of some gently sloping hill country. In the daytime, it probably commanded a view of the plentiful, rural green landscape. However, this dark farm road was now only lit up by their one headlight, along with light from the moon and the stars in the night sky.

I wonder if I’ll be able to return to Japan by the day after tomorrow... Sousuke thought to himself.

Doubt crept into his mind, a small uneasiness. He had missed his tests, and he wasn’t confident that he could make it in time for the make-ups. If Ms. Kagurazaka were to investigate into the reason he had missed, how would he explain it this time? He was also worried about the matter of her disassembled car. It would be a problem if he couldn’t pass. But why- why would it be such a problem?

He went over these things again and again in his mind. Then, as they were crossing over a small hill, Sousuke heard a noise.

At first he thought he was hearing things, but he wasn’t.

Then he thought it might be something wrong with the engine. That also wasn’t it.

He could definitely hear it. From far away.

Whirrr... the sound of turbine blades spinning at high velocity. The low, muffled sound of the exhaust. The intermittent sound of heavy footsteps. Together, they were gradually approaching closer to the area where Sousuke and the others were.

“Hey,” Sousuke started to say to Mao and Kurz, but he needn’t have bothered; the two were already up and looking around the area. However, their field of vision was impaired by the dense growth of pitch-black shrubbery on both sides of the road.

“It’s coming from the direction of five o’clock,” said Kurz. From behind them and to the right, a burst of leaves went flying out from the side facing a distant thicket. Whatever the enormous thing was, it was plowing down all of the trees like matchsticks.

The sound grew louder. Now there was no doubt. It carried a gas turbine engine, and had a body that walked upon two legs. In other words-

“It’s an AS. This is bad”

“Is it the mafia’s?”

“One of their colleagues’. They bought up some old models from Eastern Europe and Russia with the intention of palming them off on some African dictators or guerrilla groups. The regulations for western equipment are strict, but recently Soviet-made-”

“It’s coming!”

The last of the shrubbery was leveled, and a machine in the shape of a gigantic human appeared.

It was a Soviet-made Arm Slave, the Rk-92 Savage. The eight meter-tall body stood amidst the dancing foliage. Its huge, frog-like head was attached to the top of a squat, egg-shaped torso. In its right hand it carried a small-type machine gun.

A faint red light shone in both of its eyes, which were now fixed upon the Fiat. In the next instant, the AS was tearing up the

earth underneath it as broke into a run with explosive acceleration and power.

“Damn... if it’s not one thing, it’s another. They’re a really persistent bunch, aren’t they? They want to end it with this.”

“It is the end. At this rate, we’re gonna...! Can’t you go any faster!?”

“I keep telling you, this is the limit.”

A small car like this could carry four people, but they were on unpaved, bad road. No matter how much he pushed it, the most it would go was about 100 kilometers per hour. This wasn’t enough against the following Savage, which, even over this kind terrain, could run about 130 kilometers at high speed. But this number didn’t surpass the catalog’s safety documentation- it would be possible to run even further if the machine had been tweaked.

It wasn’t the only one, though. There were two, no, three of them. One by one, they broke through the thicket, jumped onto the road and started to catch up.

“We can’t escape,” Sousuke said under his breath. Escape route guidance and make-up exams were out of the question now. If they were less than perfect, he might never be able to return to school.

“Guess this means they won’t let us surrender.”

“Not after they’ve gone to this extent...”

As they were saying this, the first Savage approached the Fiat. It was traveling in a forward-bent position at high speed. The dark green AS then lifted its massive left arm over its head. It seemed it was going to strike without using its gun.

“Get down!”

Sousuke slammed on the brakes. The Savage’s left arm made a horizontal cut, hitting the top of the car. It tore off the roof, and the car lurched right.

“Geh...!!”

They were hit again. Sousuke cut the wheel and ran underneath the feet of the Savage. They seemed in imminent danger of being trampled, but they were able to dodge the enemy’s blow.

However, the Fiat was about at its limit. There was a weird squealing sound coming from the front wheels, and white smoke was spewing from the engine. The RPMs wouldn’t go up, and their speed went down.

The speed at which the Savage was running dropped off a little while it reorganized itself. It quit hitting the car, and instead decided to fire on it. It aimed the machine gun in its right hand towards the Fiat.

It’s no use- Thought the three of them at the same time.

Just then, something long and slender hit the Savage’s front armor. There was also an explosion at about the same time. After a short delay, a deafening sound resounded throughout the neighboring area.

“!?”

It was only visible for a second, but that was an anti-tank dagger- was what Sousuke judged. The bomb that the AS had thrown hit the enemy suit right in its center. The Savage staggered, went up in a mass of flames and fell over. The other two machines were taken aback by this sudden assault, but deployed with keen movements nevertheless.

“Who is it? Where are they?” Mao looked all around the area.

A vague shadow rose up from the dark farm road up ahead of them. The atmosphere was strained, and pale lightening lit up the sky. An AS appeared as if it had seeped from some

imperceptible membrane. That was the invisibility function of the ECS.

“An M9?”

They knew that agile silhouette well. The figure that had just appeared was the 3rd generation AS that Sousuke and the others normally piloted, the M9 Gernsback. However, they could see some subtle differences between this one and the M9. Besides the upper arms and thighs having more volume, the shape of the head was fairly different. Actually, it looked more like the Arbalest. The color wasn't grey, but jet black. It was completely black from the top of its head to the tips of its toes, except for a faint orange light from the sensors on its head.

“Who are they with?”

“I don't know.”

The black M9 sprinted forth.

The two other Arm Slaves postponed their attack on Sousuke and the others and entered into battle with the unknown machine. One went to the left, and the other to the right, moving at high speed. Just as they made like they were going to pin the M9 between them-

Before the enemy machines could fire, the black M9 jumped.

It cleared the machine gun's line of fire, deftly making use of obstacles in the way, and weaving through the terrain with intense movements, drew close to one of the ASes. Moving in the blink of an eye, the M9 pulled the monomolecular cutter from out of its armpit and plunged it into the Savage's chest as it went by it.

The armor let out an awful scream.

It had been an exact hit to the cockpit. The pilot probably had been killed instantly. It was an efficient, but also ruthless, way of doing things. The remaining unit didn't even having the luxury

of flinching. While it randomly fired its machine gun, the black M9 faced it and charged. Using the enemy it had slaughtered just a moment ago as a shield, the M9 passed the bombarding fire without trouble.

The two drew closer. The M9 threw away its shield, moving lightly. In the next instant, the last Savage blew up. The M9 had driven its anti-tank dagger into it from a close distance, and in a second had sheltered itself from the force of the blast. If an amateur had been watching, they probably would have only been able to discern that something had happened.

The fuel tank of the AS that had been used as a shield finally caught fire and exploded, causing the unit to go up in a blaze. All around the Fiat, which could now only drive very sluggishly, the three Savages burned, sending up black smoke.

From the first shot, the battle had lasted roughly 30 seconds.

“...ha haa,” exclaimed Kurz. Without using any firearms, it had beaten three units with just standard issue knives.

Even though the M9’s mobility completely surpassed that of the Savage’s, this particular unit’s pilot was quite exceptional.

The black unit ran beside the Fiat without any appearance of stopping. The M9’s head was equipped with dual sensors like the Arbalest was.

Like a bird of prey, it looked downed on Sousuke and the others with its sharp eyes. The M9 then let out a groan, which was the sound of its coolant ventilation system. It didn’t do much for the post-combat’s temporary radiation disposal, but it still made a noise that sounded very much like the growl of a tiger or a lion.

“...”

The M9 pointed its finger east, then changed course and headed west. In a moment it was far away from Sousuke and the others. They were speechless, not knowing what to say.



“Huh? What just...”

It slid back its armor here and there, exposing a red lens-shaped part. It then operated its ECS, and a laser screen scorched through the atmosphere, enveloping the unit in a veil of light. At once the M9 disappeared, melting into the surrounding darkness.

Only a thin purple-colored band remained, trailing after it. Silence covered the area.

“...What’s going on? Who was in that thing?”

“No idea.”

“But, it was probably one of ours, right?”

“It would seem so, but...”

“Well, who was it, then?”

The three just let the vanished mysterious unit pass on, dumbfounded.

It ended without them knowing the identity of the black M9.

Right now Mithril was supposed to be the only group in the world who employed the latest M9 models. Even in the American military, the EMD (technology, production development) was still in the test phases. Not to mention the fact that the only ones who knew about the secret operation in Sicily were Tessa, Mardukas, and Kalinin.

Kalinin had heard from somewhere, and had even sent reinforcements... that was the most natural assumption, but without revealing any affiliation, without even saying one thing, they were left with no explanation as to why he just disappeared like that. In the end, Mao called Kalinin on the satellite transmitter that Sousuke had brought, requesting more information.

“You are not qualified to know,” replied Kalinin in his usual, businesslike tone.

“Even though I was there?”

“No, not even then. Right now you just concentrate on getting out of there.”

“...Understood, Sir. Mao out.”

After the communication ended, Mao began ranting.

“Ahhh, he makes me sick! Why does that old man always, ALWAYS have to be like that?! For Christ’s sake....!!”

“Oh please. You say that, but just seeing his shadow makes the women on base squeal. Even though I’m younger, more handsome, and not to mention much nicer than he is,” complained Kurz, to which Sousuke gave a surprised look.

“The Lt. Commander does?”

“That’s right. You didn’t know? Try paying attention to what they say in the cafeteria. The girls in communications and the girls in correspondence are always making a fuss, saying ‘The Lt. Commander is so cool, isn’t he?’ There’s a rumor that recently he and Nora from the tech department have been having secret meetings, just the two of them.”

“With Lt. Lemming? What kind of secret meetings?”

“Secret meetings are secret meetings. Even the Lt. Commander’s a man. Whatever he does, he does it well. Heh heh heh...”

“Hmm...”

Sousuke didn’t understand one thing of what Kurz had said just now. But he guessed from the way he was laughing that it was probably the Lt. Commander’s uncharacteristic behavior.

When it came to Kalinin’s female relationships, Sousuke only knew about his wife who died in an accident back in the Russia days. His wife Iryna was a moderately well-known violinist, as well as a fragile beauty with slender features. Come to think of it, Lt. Nora Lemming sort of resembled Iryna somehow.

“But that’s enough of peoples’ stories for now. Let’s hurry up and blow this island already.”

“Right.”

Their conversation ended, and they headed towards Catania as per their orders.

The rest of their escape went so smoothly that it was almost disappointing.

They switched out cars in a nearby town and continued driving through the night. In Catania they obtained some fake identification papers as well as American military uniforms, and from there headed to the NATO air base nearby. Mao had formally been an officer in the Marines, and because the security at this little country base was so lax, slipping in was extremely easy.

They also boarded a transport plane going to the Aviano air base in Northern Italy without any difficulty.

They let their kidnap victim Vincent Bruno sleep the entire time. They dressed him in a discharged officer’s uniform and put him in a wheelchair, giving the explanation that “He was seriously injured while on a top secret mission in the Middle East, and has been in a comatose state most of the time.” Sicily was the place that held memories of him when he had been healthy, and they were bringing him there at his family’s request. Some members of his family were senators of certain renown, so this trip was a secret. It was a shame that being exposed to the smell of the dirt here hadn’t stirred his senses... that was their story.

“He’s... unconscious? Like this?”

The steward on the transport plane looked very suspiciously at Bruno, who was a pretty strapping guy for someone in a coma.

“That’s right. But his internal organs are quite healthy... What’s that look for?” said Mao, who was wearing the insignia of a Lieutenant, to the steward, who was a Corporal.

“No, it’s just...”

“Don’t you dare look at this man like that. This man is the way he is because he fought for his country. Someone like you couldn’t even begin to comprehend one ten-thousandth of the hell that this man has seen. I won’t stand for you pitying him or scorning him!”

“I-I’m very sorry, Ma’am. Please forgive me if I’ve offended- ”

“No, your attitude has been incorrigible. I want your full name, rank, identification number and post right now!”

The corporal, who now looked as if he were about to cry, gave her his information while apologizing over and over again, and didn’t press the subject of Bruno any further. They probably wouldn’t have been able to travel like this at a civilian airport.

“You’re quite an actress.”

“I look up to you,” both Sousuke and Kurz exclaimed after the corporal had run off. Mao’s face looked fed up.

“Ahh, talking like that wore me out. I thought I’d slip up and say the F-word or something like that...”

Afterwards, without any other problems arising, the transport plane on which they were riding took off ten minutes late.

A feeling of relief swept over them.

After this, the plans were for Mao and Kurz to continue on to Australia, bringing Bruno into Mithril’s Operations Headquarters. On the way they would part with Sousuke, who would then return to Japan alone. He would probably arrive in Tokyo tomorrow.

The sound of the turbo propeller engines resounded inside the plane. It was a terrible noise, but not something they couldn't get used to.

The seats rattled, and there were only five or six soldiers sitting in them.

The light from the autumn Sicilian sun filtered in through the windows on the plane. It was bright and made it hard to sleep. They hadn't slept any since the night before, but they still needed time for their excited nerves to settle down.

"Anyway-" said Kurz, settling into a crude seat. He had broken the languid silence that had continued for the ten minutes since take-off.

"Are you okay?"

"What do you mean?" returned Sousuke sullenly, going over World History vocabulary to himself.

"That's what I mean. The tests- you missed them, didn't you?"

"Yes."

It's true, missing the midterms did hurt... thought Sousuke.

Being called out suddenly for an overseas mission, on top of already missing school no telling how many times without any excuse were hurting his grades in a number of subjects. At this rate, just as Kaname said, he might fail.

"However, this job is important, too. Actually, who knows what would've happened if I hadn't come last night," said Sousuke, pointing out when Mao and Kurz had been surrounded back at the mafia's mansion.

"Yeah, we would have been in trouble then, wouldn't we?"

"Mmm. Maybe so," answered Mao arrogantly from the seat in front of them. "Actually, I had thought out several moves ahead back then."

“I see...” said Sousuke downheartedly, feeling a little unnecessary. Somehow he got the feeling she was really saying “It would have been better for you to take your exams quietly without tagging along with us.”

“No,” Mao added after some consideration, “you really saved us back there. But you know, I’m a little worried about you, too. What were you saying...?”

“About my passing?”

“No, not that. I meant everything about your situation. Going to school while guarding Kaname, going out on missions like this, not to mention them pushing that ‘Arbalest’ on you, too—don’t you think that’s too much responsibility?”

“...”

“In the beginning, I thought, ‘It’s okay, it’s only temporary,’ because you were managing your job without any problems. But recently—”

“I haven’t made any mistakes.”

“That’s not what I meant. It’s purely a physical and temporary problem. Actually, doing this and going to school has become pretty bad for you, hasn’t it?”

“That might be so, but...”

“No matter how shorthanded we are, you have a limit. If I was in your place, I would let the Lt. Commander have it for sure.”

“But!” interjected Kurz, “if you think about it, well, isn’t it okay? School and stuff, as long as he’s reasonable about it. He entered with forged papers anyway, so there’s no reason that he has to push himself to graduate.”

Sousuke went undercover at Jindai High School in order to better guard Kaname as best he could. His profession up to this point had been as a soldier of Mithril, and being a high school student was only a temporary placement. There were fundamental

differences between him and Kaname, as well as the other students. As Kurz had said, it was not necessary for him to push himself to graduate from high school.

“Well, I guess you’re right...” said Mao in a dreamy voice, turning back and glancing in Sousuke’s direction for a moment. “You seem to have been listening to what we have to say about it, but... what do you think?”

“About what?”

“About your plans for the future.”

“I’ll follow orders. That’s all,” he answered calmly, gazing out of the window from which sunlight was now pouring through.

If it had been the usual Mao, she just would have laughed at Sousuke’s naïve answer- but this time, for some reason, she became irritated and snapped back at him.

“You always say that. I’m talking about your plans for your life, here. You’re only seventeen, aren’t you? What are you going to do starting right now? Haven’t you at least thought about it a little bit? Missions, orders- you just use them as an excuse to run away.”

“Run away? Me?”

“That’s right. Since it’s easier to answer ‘Yes, Sir’ to what people say before you’re even asked.”

“...”

“You’re strangely involved in this one,” said Kurz.

“Not really. It’s just what I’ve been thinking for a while.”

And with that, Mao became quiet.

From the window, Sousuke could see Mt. Etna, Europe’s largest active volcano, far off into the distance. The atmosphere was rather thick, and Etna’s form was shrouded in a grey haze.

My plans for the future...

For all that Mao had said, Sousuke had not gotten angry. In fact, it had made him think. It had also sounded a lot like what Kaname had just said to him the night before.

My plans for my life.

He vaguely followed the consideration of its meaning, and when he really, really thought about it, he felt like it was the first time he had ever heard those words. If he reworded them, it meant his personal long-term goals. What would he be doing five years from now, ten years from now- look at that, and decide on guidelines for his life. That's what those words meant.

Up until now, he had never thought about himself five years from now. He hadn't even been aware of that kind of existence. For most of Sousuke Sagara's past, he had been involved in conflict and hard battles just to survive. Does a wild animal that doesn't even know where tomorrow's food will come from worry about what will happen five years from now? Words such as 'future' hadn't resounded vacantly in his ears.

His future? Doesn't matter. He had chosen the security of ammunition over his future.

That was how he had always felt. At least, until six months ago.

He barely felt it as change had worked its way into that bleak state of mind. The life that he spent with Kaname and everyone else attending Jindai High School was beginning to affect his heart in a way that Sousuke couldn't see. It was as if someone were dissolving a sheet of ice, so that the vague outline of what life had to offer could be shown to him.

A future. I have one of those, don't I?

Somewhere in the corner of his mind, he'd sometimes wonder this to himself. He didn't know the answer, but at the very least he had started to ask the question. This was the change.

Days went by, and no one changed.

There was an end to every kind of life-style, and that wave would sweep even him away.

The normal everyday comes to an end, bringing in the next future- that indistinct truth made Sousuke feel uneasy.

“Kurz...”

“What is it?”

“What will you be doing five years from now?” Sousuke asked suddenly. Kurz gave him a blank look.

“Let’s see. Well, I’d like to be well-off living with a good-looking woman.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to?”

“Who knows,” answered Kurz, adjusting his military hat low over his eyes. They arm wrestled, and after a big yawn, Kurz added, “I don’t know, but... there’s no harm in going ahead and thinking it. ‘Night.’”

Kurz was silent after that. Sousuke looked at the seat in front of him, and could see Mao’s head resting against the wall and hear her quiet breathing as she slept.

Mt. Etna receded into the distance as their plane left Sicily.

Chapter 2: Under the Water's Surface

October 16th, 08:53 (Japan Standard Time)

Choufu-shi, Tokyo, Japan

Jindai High School

On the fourth day of the mid-term exams, the first subject was World History.

It was 23 minutes into the test. The sound of test pages turning and pens writing filled the room. Since it was so quiet, the noise of a car passing on the main street in front of the school sounded loud. Kaname's eyes ran over the top of her test paper.

The Roman Empire's prosperity. Five intelligent rulers. Augustus. Cicero. Sicily's rebellion. This or that. There were many words that she knew but didn't understand, and that she'd probably forget completely after the test was over. Really, regular testing was just a pointless and unproductive ritual.

She glanced up towards the window.

Sousuke's seat was empty.

He hadn't been heard from since the day before yesterday when she had called him before exams. She had thought he might show up today, but he continued to be absent. In the end, he had missed everything since the first day.

Really...

A sigh escaped somehow. Since it had been quiet in school thanks to Sousuke's absence, she should have been able to relax. So why did she feel uneasy? Why did she feel as if something were missing?

No, I can't. I'm in the middle of a test right now. I have to concentrate.

She fixed her attention back onto the problems.

The collapse of the Chinese Empire. The invasion of the Huns. The Yellow Turban Rebellions. Sou Sou. The fight of Akakabe. This and that. Since she had read the story about “The Annals of the Three Kingdoms” in a comic before, she knew this one well. She just couldn’t remember the kanji^{*1} for it. Now how do you write the character for “kou” in “koumei”...?

I wonder where he’s gone off to... She suddenly thought as she was filling in an answer.

I wonder what kind of job it is... if he’s met up with any danger... if he’s okay... or if he’s meeting up with that girl... speaking of which, he was acting strange when I called him the other day...

She returned back to herself with a start.

No, I can’t do this right now. I did it again. I’m neglecting my test and unconsciously thinking about him.

Ahh, damn...

It’s his fault. He’s been absent without any excuses, and now he’s skipping tests. So I’m worried. I mean, I am the class representative, and we’re not exactly strangers. Those are the only reasons, but even so, it still tugs at me. Why is it bothering me so much? If he’s not here, then I should be able concentrate on the tests, but...!

Just then, the classroom door flew open.

“I’m...sorry I’m late,” said none other than Sousuke Sagara as soon as he entered, his shoulders heaving.

It seemed that he had come in a quite a hurry because there was sweat pouring down his taciturn face. And for some reason he wasn’t wearing his school uniform, but some dark green camouflaged clothes instead. One could see the design was different from the field clothes that he occasionally wore. The ones

he wore now had the words “U.S. MARINES” embroidered on the chest.



“Sagara... You’ve come back to take the test? And what’s with your clothes?” said the test supervisor with the frown.

“I’m very sorry. I didn’t have any time to change, so...”

“Never mind, it’s okay. Just hurry up and take your seat.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sousuke hurried over to his seat. On the way, his classmate Shinji Kazama whispered to him.

“Sagara, why are you wearing those clothes...?”

“A situation came up.” He replied shortly, sitting down.

He received the test from the teacher, and taking out his pencil box, he quickly turned over his paper and began.

Kaname looked at him absent-mindedly from across the room. Relieved, she felt as if a pressure had been lifted from her chest. For a moment, their eyes met. In lieu of a ‘good morning’, Sousuke lifted his pen a little. Kaname hastily withdrew her gaze and concentrated back on her test.



October 17th, 16:09 (Australia Standard Time)
Sydney, Australia
Mithril Operations Headquarters

This is the second time I’ve come to this investigation room with Lt. Commander Kalinin like this... thought Tessa.

Their previous subject had been a 15 or 16 year old boy; this time it was a middle-aged man.

Vincent Bruno, whom Mao and the others had kidnapped, was smiling arrogantly in a cocky manner.

It was probably just a bluff. This wasn’t a police station—this was Mithril Operations Headquarters. There was no lawyer

here to defend him, nor would he get a fair trial. And Bruno, sitting behind the one-way mirror, knew that as well.

Tessa was only wearing a light coat over the uniform that she always wore. Similarly, Kalinin was wearing olive-colored field clothes. Since they had taken one of Mithril's jet planes and were then met by a limousine at the airport, they had not been seen by civilian eyes.

They had flown out to Sydney from the Merida Island base in the West Pacific when they received word that the mission to retrieve Bruno had been successful.

This man was partly responsible for the desperate crisis that had taken place on her ship. There was no mistaking this, but she couldn't make herself believe it. He was the enemy on whom she was supposed to place the rest of her hate, but she could only feel cold disdain for him brooding within her chest.

"I don't believe it," she muttered. "I don't believe how such a pathetic excuse for a human being almost managed to sink my ship."

"You could say that it's because he is such a pathetic character that he was able to be such a good actor. It wasn't very hard for him to win over his enemies, was it?" replied Kalinin.

Through the one-way mirror, they could see two other men in the investigation room with Bruno. They were both from Operations Headquarters, a First Lieutenant and a Corporal. According to Kalinin, the First Lieutenant had come from the Intelligence section in Peru, and seemed to know a lot about interrogation.

"Let's start with some easy questions, Mr. Bruno," the Lieutenant began. "You were the secretary in charge of human relations. In June of this year, you made it so that John Howard Danigan and Guen Bien Bo would be assigned to the SRT unit of

the Western Pacific Fleet's *Tuatha de Danaan*. You downgraded, or possibly even erased, the high priority data on four other active non-commissioned officers, as well as the data about the recommendations of the Belize training camp, and they were sent to the *Tuatha de Danaan*, who, at the time, were shorthanded and had no choice in the matter. Or am I wrong?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Bruno nonchalantly, gazing off into space. The Lieutenant just smiled calmly, moved to the restrained corporal next to him and said:

"Do it."

"Yes sir," answered the large corporal, who immediately punched Bruno in the face to wake him up.

"Guh-!"

Bruno was about to topple out of his chair when the corporal caught him up by the collar and pulled him close. He pressed Bruno's wrist against the desk, and seizing his little finger, bent it back in the opposite direction.

"...St-stop I-"

Crack! was the horrible sound that came next. The bone in his little finger had snapped, and Bruno's ear-shattering scream filled the interrogation room.

"Don't worry. That's all," Kalinin informed Tessa, who had flinched and averted her eyes from the spectacle. Bruno was shaking all over and sobbing.

"Stop...please stop! I understand, I'll tell you anything! So...so please, no more..." he screeched, clutching his pinky finger.

"Then answer me. Were you the one who sent Danigan and Guen to the TDD-1?" asked the Lieutenant in a cold voice.

"Yes! Yes, I did!"

"Whose orders?"

"I don't know."

“Don’t lie!”

“Wait! I-I don’t know their real name! They just said to use ‘Amalgam’!”

“‘Amalgam’? What’s that?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I thought it was probably just some Soviet secret service or something. They didn’t deny it either. It was just petty stuff in the beginning! They paid me \$200,000 in advance...two hundred grand, can you imagine!? It’s not like I had any reason to refuse! I replied to them twice-”

“What do you think...?” Kalinin asked Tessa, who was listening quietly. Looking at the indicator on the LCD screen next to him, he continued, “It doesn’t look like he’s lying, and I don’t think he has any hidden motives. Although it would appear that he himself doesn’t even know much about it.”

The computer was analyzing what Bruno said in real time-checking the stress level in his voice and authenticating the veracity of the suspect’s testimony. It was a fairly accurate system, a type of advanced lie detector. The purpose of the first violent blow had simply been to excite the suspect’s agitation for this kind of analysis.

“‘Amalgam’...I wonder what that name implies?”

‘Mithril’ was the name of a fictional silver metal. The enemy called themselves ‘Amalgam’, a mercury alloy. Or maybe it was just some kind of bad joke.

“I don’t know their true identity! I swear!” cried Bruno. His pale face was covered in cold sweat, and he glared into the darkroom from the other side of the mirror.

“Are you satisfied now!? You heard it all, right!? Don’t just stand there looking in from there, how about you come out and show yourselves!! Look at what you’ve done to me...just what the

hell is ‘Mithril’, anyway!? It’s the ‘metal of evil’, that’s what it is! Hypocrites who pretend to be heroes, that’s what you are!”

“Calm down, Mr. Bruno.”

“What would you have had me to do, huh!? I hope you’re all cursed!! Die like the murderers you are! You bastards! You’re all bastards!”

Tessa angrily tried to ignore him. But still, a single word wasn’t able to stop the outpour of deadly language coming from Bruno’s mouth.

“How dare he...”

The faces of her subordinates who had been lost in this affair came to mind, and she felt as if the blood in her entire body had started to boil. She wanted to turn the lights on in the darkroom, show herself to that man, and level out some verbal abuse to him. *You’re the murderer. Give me back my men. You’re the one who’s cursed. Even though you’re just a worthless man who doesn’t know anything, you sit there and vomit up poison. You don’t know your place- you presume to judge me, you greedy, no-good imbecile. Don’t be so cocky...! You want me to order that corporal there to break off the rest of your fingers...!?*

Violent emotions welled up within her. She wasn’t just simply angry, it was as if something more insolent was trying to provoke her.

“Captain-”

Kalinin’s voice brought her back to herself.

Her palms were damp with sweat.

She was disgusted with herself. She wanted to deny it, but she couldn’t. Just now, she had enjoyed the sight of that man in pain.

“Captain, let’s leave the rest to the Lieutenant. Admiral Borda is waiting.”

“...you’re right,” she answered weakly, and turned away from the storming Bruno.

“It’s a terrible way of doing things, isn’t it...?”

For him, and for us, she added to herself.

“I don’t deny it, but it is effective. It’s not life threatening, and his finger will soon heal.”

“I know, but still...” she glanced at the profile of Kalinin’s expressionless face and faltered.

Does he not feel anything? He was looking straight at what just happened, but wasn’t even shaken at all. *Even though, just like me, that man killed his subordinates.*

Just as she finished thinking this, the Russian added in a cool tone of voice:

“If it had been me, his finger would’ve been cut off.”



They left the interrogation room, and went to the office of the Chief of Operations.

Mithril’s Operations Headquarters, which they were in right now, was located on a street corner in the heart of Sydney.

If you had said that Mithril, which was an organization active throughout the world, had their most important base located here in Australia, two out of three people would have given you a dubious look. And if you had said that a base here was more advantageous than one in Europe for coordinating transportation facilities and ground facilities, as well as taking care of many other various things, no business man would have believed you.

At least, that was common sense up until twenty years ago. But because of the growth in satellite communications technology and the internet, the wealth of information flooding the world

today made the physical location of headquarters unimportant. Also, because places like Paris, London, Brussels and Geneva had old influential information agencies- establishing a large base there would be difficult.

Simply stated, it was a matter of claiming one's turf.

Mithril was a young organization. Almost ten years before they had instituted their model, they had plans to build their Operations Headquarters in Europe, but small problems kept cropping up one after another, and it the end overflowed. Presently, out of the many information bureaus that Mithril had, only a few were located in Europe.

The Operations Headquarters, for being called "The Skyscraper", was actually a rather short building.

On paper, the owner of the building was the "Argyros Security Company". "Argyros" was the front that Mithril used, but in actuality, they were running security businesses in various places of the world, and making moderate profit from it. The outward appearance of many of Mithril's members was that of people working for this security firm. And because discharged personnel commonly told others that they had worked for the security company, this disguise had worked out to be very convenient. Mithril also possessed many other companies such as this one.

The fields of business which they owned varied, consisting of such businesses as "Ross & Humbleton", the manufacturers of the M9's nuclear power reactor, "Umantack", which did the majority of their shipping, "Martin Marietta", which was their aviation mainstay, and so on; they ranged from rapidly growing up-and-coming enterprises, to those which were saved from the verge of bankruptcy. They also had influential banking facilities, as well as nominal paper companies. Public fronts, capital

investment, equipment supplies, searching for new talent...there was much more than just managing the organization, and Mithril made use of these businesses. Many of people who worked for these companies didn't even know that Mithril existed.

The "Argyros" building that Mithril used for their Operations Headquarters appeared somewhat old, but the security system itself was top-notch. Every point in the building was equipped with bug and wiretap counter-measures, countless surveillance devices and plain-clothed security guards on the lookout for intruders.

Tessa and Kalinin arrived at the Chief of Operations' office, and a male secretary came out to receive them.

"Nice to see you again, Madame Captain."

"Nice to see you, Mr. Jackson. You look well. But please don't call me Madame Captain." As she said this, the under-forty secretary smiled brightly.

"Nevertheless, you don't look like a 'Miss' like that, since from what I've heard, you've been doing very well for yourself. It's only right that I show you some respect."

"Thank you. Well...no matter how much I protest, you'd still do it anyway."

Before she assumed command of the *Tuatha de Danaan*, Tessa had worked here in Operations Headquarters for a period of time. Besides assisting Admiral Borda, she did research on battles at sea, battles underwater, and battles under special circumstances. This secretary, Lieutenant Jackson, was a friend of hers from then, and at that time, he called her things like "Miss" and "Little Teletha". She wasn't promoted to the rank of Captain until after she took command of the TDD-1.

"Where's the Admiral?"

“He’s on the phone right now, but I don’t think he’ll mind if you just go on in. He’ll probably check you again while he’s talking. The security’s been pretty tight around here.”

“Yes, he will. Thank you.”

After she thanked him, both she and Kalinin walked into Admiral Borda’s office.

The room almost as wide as a cafe, but the walls’ high bookshelves were overflowing with books. Much of the furniture employed the wood in its design and had a black glossy finish. The indirect lighting caused by soft natural light and incandescent lamps gave the room an atmosphere like that of an old library.

Admiral Borda was sitting in his work chair, talking on the phone.

“Yes...mmm. I know...yes...that’s my line. We’ll take care of any improper conduct in our department ourselves. Of course we’ll give you a record of the interrogation. Trust me a little... Custody? I don’t understand what you mean.”

While he was busy talking to whomever, Admiral Borda returned Tessa and Kalinin’s salute, pointed to the guest chairs, and without making a sound mouthed the words “Have a seat”.

“...I guess so. Well, do as you please...that’s right. We should save that problem for another day...mmm. I’ll think about it... No. I have guests, so I’m gonna go,” he unilaterally informed the other party, and pressed the hang-up switch. He threw the receiver on the desk as if he had been touching something disgusting, and slowly stood up.

“Glad you’ve come. Want anything to drink?” he asked, walking to the mini-bar in the corner of the room.

“Thank you, but I’ll just have water.”

“Lt. Commander?”

“I’ll have the same.”

“Heh, how dull,” he said, shrugging. He took a bottle of Perrier out of the refrigerator.

“How are the M9s working out, Lt. Commander?” Borda asked in lieu of a greeting.

“There’s room for improvement, but overall, it’s been favorable. There’s still the problem of maintenance, however. Because the compatibility of certain parts is too low, our current stockpiles were reduced to nothing,” Kalinin answered briskly.

“You’re still the same as ever. But I’ll remember,” Borda said with a smile.

When people talked about Mithril’s Chief of Operations, Jerome Borda, they said that was like a good-natured uncle. He reminded people of one of those apron-wearing hot dog vendors, because of his mild demeanor.

He was almost 60 years old, but his salt-and-pepper colored hair made him appear ten years younger. Even to someone like Tessa, who was young enough to be his granddaughter, his looks were quite charming. And though it might be a little rude to the man himself, the way the skin under his eyes and the corners of his mouth drooped a little gave him the air of a cute little dog.

But that wasn’t to say that he wasn’t dignified. A regular person could guess from just meeting him once that he was a man of firm intelligence and experience, with leadership qualities and fortitude. Actually, he had been an officer in the American Navy for more than 30 years, where he had climbed the ranks from sailor to admiral. There was sorrow and grief of facing the world hidden in his eyes- and in that respect, he wasn’t a man much different from Kalinin.

“That was the Chief of Information on the phone,” he said as he poured water into the glasses. “It looks like we made them mad by kidnapping Bruno, since they had also found out that

Bruno was in Sicily. We went to the trouble of alerting Paltholon so they wouldn't stall us."

"Paltholon" was one of the four squadrons in the Operations Department, and normally they would have carried out the kidnapping operation. By moving the Western Pacific Fleet's *Tuatha de Danaan* there, they had outwitted both Bruno and the Information Bureau. Then again, only a few people in the squadron had been moved.

"So we'll be handing Bruno over to the Intelligence Department?" Tessa asked.

"Yes. Of course I refused, but...by the way, did you come to see the interrogation?"

"Yes..."

"I need to know what you found out from it, since the Squadron Chief will be continuing it from here on out- your road is one of carnage. A corridor of long, grim battle fields," Borda said, with a hint of mystery in his expression.

The one who led me to witness that scene was Admiral Borda himself, then... Tessa realized.

As soon as they had arrived, they met with a non-commissioned officer who told them "The Admiral has a little business that he has to attend to. Would you like to watch Bruno's interrogation until then?"

Why would he show me such a thing? What would I learn from it?

Battle was neither a beautiful nor a dirty thing- she didn't think that he would preach such a common sermon to her. Of course, when she compared herself to the Admiral or Kalinin, or many of the people there, she hadn't seen "dirty things". She had been fortunate in that respect.

But what this middle-aged gentleman was telling her was even more of an ambiguous concept. It was complex for being so simple. Was there not some symbolism in the fact that she couldn't express words or logic in that situation?

An ominous hint. A melancholic miniature. Bits and pieces of things to come.

Was he not hinting about her being in that situation, and the difficult dilemma she would have to face one way or the other...? Even though she was a genius, there were principles that she couldn't comprehend as a sixteen or seventeen-year-old girl that worked on the flip side of the phenomenon- were those principles showing themselves through the Admiral...?

"You think too much," the Admiral said, handing the glass to Tessa. "You'll understand either way, sooner or later."

"...What's going to happen to Bruno?"

"I would call for capital punishment, but this isn't the regular army. That would be execution. Regulations have allowances for punishment by firing squad, but that hasn't been the practice. The standard punishment is long-term confinement, until all the information he knows about Mithril's equipment, organization, agents and such becomes old and useless."

Tessa also knew those regulations. Imprisonment of five years or so would probably be an unending amount of time. Ten years, perhaps even fifteen. But would this organization still exist then? She suddenly became caught up in these groundless thoughts.

"This isn't a buddy-buddy club. Penal code has to be applied. Anyway... the real punishment will be decided by the board after they've finished interrogating him," Borda said, changing subjects as he sat down on the sofa opposite to them.

"Now then... I called you out here to talk about something else, as well. I think we need make some structural adjustments."

“That’s to say...?”

“I’ve looked over the case report on the incident at Perio Island. Those two Japanese people- the girl named Kaname Chidori and Sergeant Sagara- the role those two played is really quite unbelievable. You also stressed it in your report, but it seems that they were the ones who saved the TDD-1.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“The importance of those two has become undeniable. In the matter of the ‘Whispered’, as well as in the matter of the ARX-7, it’s already come to the point where it can’t be handled as ‘one of the pending problems’.

“The Department of Intelligence has been complaining about this and that and the other about it. There’s also the issue regarding ‘Wraith’.”

“...”

“It’s about time we looked again at their situation. Wouldn’t you agree, Lt. Commander?” Borda asked.

Kalinin drooped his head slightly and replied in a reserved voice, “You’re right. However-”

“I don’t need any bureaucracy. Even if we smooth things over somehow, it won’t change the inefficiency in the way things are being done right now.”

“Yes sir.”

“Your opinion, Teletha?”

“...it’s exactly as you say, but-”

A look of extreme displeasure came over Borda’s face, and he pointed straight at her.

“‘But’ what?”

“Nothing...”

“Very well. Now let’s talk about some concrete plans.”



October 19th, 14:59 (Japan Standard Time)
Choufu-shi, Tokyo, Japan
Jindai High School

The week after exams the school held life guidance sessions.

Even though it was importantly called “Life Guidance”, it was actually more of an event to listen to the teachers as they continuously gave their long-winded sermons.

The principal said:

“-Everyone might be thinking ‘But I’m just in second year’. However, even second year students have to seriously consider what path they will take after they graduate. Especially in a time like this when there’s a recession, employers want to know about what you are learning and what abilities you have, more than just your academic background. Therefore, you should really think hard about these things, as well as your plans for the future-”

And so on and so on.

He says all that, but really... thought Kaname and the others.

The class representative said:

“-alright? Stop thinking things like ‘I’ll just take my time about getting into college or getting a job’. Those kind of thoughts lead to even worse results. What about Sumo wrestlers? Even though they try with all their might to become the sumo grand champion, most Sekitori^{*2} won’t be able to; but will the Sekitori who thinks ‘Just being able to become Juuryou^{*3} is good enough for me’ really be able to become Juuryou? Probably not. Such is the severity of society. In other words-”

And so on and so on.

But since we're not Sumo wrestlers... thought Kaname and the others.

The 320-something second year students who were gathered in the gym had no ambition one way or the other.

Just as Kaname's head was about to nod off in boredom, the final speech ended.

"...so endeavor to be more, and think about it well. We'll go ahead and put information packets in front of the guidance office for the necessary people to take."

They dispersed. Starting from Class 1 and going in order, the students left the gym. Because the guidance took six hours, it wasn't long before school let out for the day.

On the way home, Kaname sat down on one of the train's rattling seats and let out a big sigh.

"You slept well, huh, Kaname..." said Kyouko, who was sitting next to her.

In front of them stood a sullen-face Sousuke. He had dark rings under his eyes from an apparent lack of sleep, probably due to the fact that he had been working day and night since Sunday reassembling Ms. Kagurazaka's car.

"Well of course. I can't take that kind of guidance counseling seriously," Kaname said, suppressing another yawn.

More than people's opinions, she wanted to hear about practical things, such as "the average annual income for a lawyers is this much", or "it's about this difficult to get into this famous company", or "just quit your dream of being an animator", and things of that nature.

"But they also said some good things, too. It made me think a little."

"Wha- Kyouko, you were paying attention?"

“Yeah. I started to think about myself... I mean, I was planning on getting a job after I graduated, but now I’m wondering what I should do...”

“Haaah...” Kaname let out a vague groan. For some reason right then, the profile of Kyouko’s usually childlike face looked much older than her own. She noticed the serious look in Kaname’s eyes, and flashed what seemed to be an embarrassed little smile.

“Well, I guess it wasn’t that serious. Other than that...” Kyouko started, staring at Sousuke, who was still standing in front of them.

“Sagara, I had been thinking it since earlier, but... hasn’t your hair grown out recently?”

“Huh?”

Sousuke gave a puzzled look.

Kaname also copied Kyouko, openly staring at Sousuke as well.

His hairstyle was the same as always, an adequate but messy cut. But when they looked at it more closely, they could see that it was longer than before. It looked like the hair in the front had grown quite a bit- but you couldn’t tell from every angle.

It wasn’t to say that it looked ugly. Because of his fearless looks, the length didn’t seem that extreme. But it had grown just enough to be bothersome.

“Now that you mention it, it has...” Kaname said, prompting Sousuke to pinch a piece of his hair in one hand.

“Does it look strange?”

“No, not really, but... speaking of which, do you normally go to a salon or someplace?”

“What do you mean by salon?”

“A barber.”

“...ah. No, I’ve never used one of those. I cut it myself.”

“With scissors?”

“With this,” he said, pulling a rather rugged combat knife out from under his uniform.

“I see... that explains it, then.”

She finally understood the reason why his hair always looked unkempt.

Just then an idea seemed to come to Kyouko, and pointing her index finger up she said in an excited voice “Hey! I just thought of something- why don’t we take Sagara to a salon? That way he could have a kind of makeover.”

“Ha ha. That would be quite...interesting.”

“Wouldn’t it? I think Rizento^{*4} looks pretty good.”

“No, it’s too stringent.”

“Then what about a mushroom cut? He could wear colorful glasses with that.”

“No... heh heh heh, a punch perm would be pretty funny, wouldn’t it?”

“In the real world?”

“Putting dog’s ears on him would be nice, too.”

“That’s not a barber-”

They carried on in this way, piling up the numerous possibilities.

At the start of the conversation, they seemed to be mostly joking in their proposal. However, because they had brought up the subject, Sousuke suddenly decided to take them up on their suggestion.

“I wouldn’t mind.”

“Huh?”

“Going to a barber. That’s where normal high school students get their hair cut, right?”



They took the south exit out of Choufu Station, and a short walk later they came to a barbershop that had somewhat of a playful feel to it.

The barbershops in Afghanistan were very different from this... thought Sousuke as he looked at the exterior.

There were also barbershops in the troubled lands where he grew up, but Sousuke had been indifferent to such facilities until now. Now his inclination to go to the barbershop came from his own ambition.

He needed to adapt more to the lifestyle of this city.

That motive was vaguely at work. If not for what Mao had said a few days before, he might not have even bothered thinking about it. Of course, there was simple curiosity as well.

“Is this place okay?”

“Yes. I leave it to you,” he said, and the three entered the shop.

“A haircut for him, please,” Kaname said to the shop stylist that met them. At that, the stylist seemingly guessed the situation, and with a sweet smile told Sousuke

“This way, please.”

“Okay...”

Sousuke clumsily sat down in the chair. The stylist first wrapped a towel around his neck, followed by a vinyl sheet.

“Now then, what kind of style are we going for?” the stylist asked Kaname and Kyouko, who were standing next to him.

“What do you think, Kaname?”

“Hmm... well, we better stop joking about getting a Mohican haircut or something like that.”

“Oh, the Mohican’s a nice one. I’ve always wanted to try doing it once myself,” the stylist joked.

While Kaname and Kyouko laughed, they discussed as to what to do. After talking for about three minutes, they finally settled on something safe.

“Well, just cut enough to where you can see the eyebrows. Since there’s a lot of hair in the back, just even it out. Is that okay, Sousuke?”

“Yes.”

“Okay then. I’ll leave him in your hands, and we’ll be waiting over there,” she said, and with a small wave, she and Kyouko went to the waiting area.

Somehow, Sousuke felt helpless. No, it wasn’t just that.

He had a bad feeling about this. Even though there wasn’t anything strange going on, he was bothered somewhere deep down.

Is it my imagination...?

He didn’t know. His intuition was often out of place here in this peaceful city. It was okay to say that he couldn’t trust it most of the time. There was no telling how many times he had messed up by trusting it...

“...there now. Time to wash, Sir.”

He started to pour some shampoo from a bottle onto Sousuke’s head.

“Wai...” Sousuke began to say, but then held back.

“Yes?”

“Never mind... please continue.”

The stylist gave a doubtful look, but put some shampoo on the top of his head. Bubbles quickly began to form as he massaged Sousuke’s hair. A complete stranger, a man whom he had never met before, was pressing his fingers vigorously against Sousuke’s scalp.

“It doesn’t itch anywhere, does it?”

“...No,” he answered shortly, although truthfully it itched all over.

He felt uneasy. He felt horribly uneasy.

What if the contents of this bottle were some kind of transdermal poison? Or the stylist had some kind of poison stingers hidden in his fingers? What if he had a small automatic pistol hidden underneath that white coat?

He would have no way of defending himself.

Don’t worry. This is just ordinary soap... he’s just an ordinary barber... Sousuke told himself.

The concept that this barber was an assassin was just nonsense. Since the one who chose this shop was Kaname, and he had decided only earlier to come here on a whim, it wasn’t as if an enemy targeting either him or Kaname would have been able to plan an ambush.

“O-kay, this way, please,” the stylist called to Sousuke, as he ran hot water in the washbasin in front of him.

“Huh?”

“So I can rinse out the shampoo.”

“Okay...”

He somehow seemed to be telling Sousuke to put his head in the sink.

But if he did that, his field of vision would become zero. It would furthermore expose his defenseless neck to this stranger, making it easy for him to do something like snap his spinal cord with a weapon, or thrust a syringe into him. Or there might even be an enemy lurking outside the shop somewhere.

“What’s wrong?”

“Is it absolutely necessary to do that?” The stylist was surprised, and gave Sousuke a troubled smile.

“Well, of course it is. I can’t cut your hair like this. Okay, this way now.”

“...”

Now overcome with dreadful mental anguish, he slowly leaned his body forward and put his head into the washbasin. Underneath the sheet, he pulled his automatic pistol out of its holster, which comforted him a little.

“How’s the water?”

“...normal,” he answered, but he was so troubled now that he wasn’t even aware of the temperature of the water.

If he let down his guard for even a second, wouldn’t this man try to take his life? Wasn’t his demand of “make yourself defenseless” kind of strange? What if someone had used some unimaginable trick to outsmart him, arriving at the barbershop earlier and pretending to be the stylist? Or what if there were other enemies who would come after him the moment he was vulnerable?

That’s right. He had no reason to be safe. Even now, there were people still after Kaname. If he were to die here, who would protect her...?

“Okay, all done here. Now then-”

As he wrapped a towel around Sousuke’s head, he slowly moved him back to his seat. Sousuke wasn’t able to see because of the towel, and the way that the stylist was briskly scrubbing his head to dry his hair was torture.

“Time to cut the ha-ir,” the stylist said, and snipping the scissors, he easily caught up some of Sousuke’s hair. A man of unknown origin was standing behind him holding a sharp object.

An alarm went off violently somewhere in the back of Sousuke’s mind.

This is bad. Get a hold of yourself. At this rate, you’ll-

It was too much.

His body moved on its own. Just as the scissors got close to his head, Sousuke grabbed the man's arm and rising from his chair slammed him into the mirror in front of them.

"Wh-what are you-?"

"Don't move!!" Sousuke yelled sharply. He looked over at the startled employees and customers, waving his gun in their direction.

"..."

But there were no enemies to speak of. The stylist, whom Sousuke now had his gun pressed against, was whining in a thin voice and struggling against him, not understanding what just happened.

There was no threat. Neither in the shop, nor outside.

His intuition had been wrong again. As usual.

"Sousuke!?"

Kaname had left the waiting area. She was headed straight for him, holding a rolled-up fashion magazine in one hand. No doubt about it, she was angry.

Correction. There is one threat...

Sousuke readily accepted his fate, and in the next instant the makeshift club came swinging down on his head.



"Really...!!"

Kaname was still mad on the way home.

"We took you because you said to... why do you always have to blow up like that!?"

"I'm ashamed of myself," Sousuke said dejectedly, following after her.

After the incident at the shop, he had joined Kaname in apologizing to the barber who told them “I’m sorry, but could you go somewhere else? No-no, of course you don’t need to pay,” and acting as if he were handling someone in the mob, he kicked them out. Afterwards, Kyouko had said “Guess it can’t be helped,” and laughing, parted with them on the way home.

“But it was too dangerous to be helpless in a situation with a stranger who had a sharp object,” Sousuke explained.

“Oh, I see. Then in that case, don’t say ‘Let’s go to the barber.’ You were getting a haircut- didn’t you imagine that’s how it would have been from the start? Would you have hurt that barber, who had done nothing wrong, if he had made one false step? Why don’t you get a grip and stop thinking that everyone’s an enemy or an assassin!”

“I can’t do that,” he stated firmly. “There are enemies out there. That’s a fact. It’s not strange that they would come to attack you.”

“That’s...” Kaname started but faltered.

If he had not pointed this out, it seems she would have forgotten. It was true, she was a target. All because she was one of the “Whispered”, whose reason for existing she didn’t know.

“Protecting you is my first priority here,” he stated clearly, and Kaname no longer felt the urge to criticize him.

“But... nothing’s happened since then,” she said in an almost whining voice.

“I know, but I can’t let my guard down.”

“For heaven’s sake...”

Since the incident on the field trip, there hadn’t been one instance where these so-called “enemies” had directly targeted her, or set up any other kinds of traps. At least, not to her knowledge. She had been caught up in some dangerous situations since then,

but those were merely “in the wrong place at the wrong time” scenarios.

Here in Tokyo, every day was peaceful. Well, her life might be a little noisier than a normal high school student’s thanks to Sousuke’s antics.

Were there really enemies out there...? It wasn’t just Sousuke and Mithril making more of a fuss than necessary...?

Kaname’s doubts were only natural.

Unconsciously, the two slackened their pace.

The residential area was very quiet now that it was dusk. Autumn was deepening, and the air was growing chillier. The evening quickly cooled down from the setting sun.

“Half-a-year has already passed...”

She meant since Sousuke first appeared in front of her in the spring. It would be six months soon.

“It’s gone by quickly, hasn’t it?”

“It has.”

“But you haven’t improved at all, Sousuke.”

“Really?”

“Really,” she said with a chuckle, and Sousuke cocked his head a little in confusion. In the end, his hair was uncut, wet and ruffled up. He looked somewhat dispirited, reminding her of a tired stray dog. He looked pretty bad. Leaving him like this would almost be irresponsible.

“Hey...” she said suddenly, after thinking for a minute.

“What?”

“Why don’t you stop by my place? Then I could finish giving you a haircut.”

Her proposal was very unexpected to him. In rare fashion, Sousuke’s eyes widened and blinked a few times in surprise.

“Do you not want to?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just...”

“Are you worried that I’ll attack you?” she asked, and he shook his head instantly.

“It’s nothing like that,” he denied insistently, feeling happy that she would do it for him. “I’m not worried- you’re an exception.”

Even though Kaname’s apartment was big enough for a family to live in, the bathroom was small and cramped.

Mocking the way the barber spoke, Kaname said “Alright, Sir, if you would please sit down,” carrying a chair into the bathroom.

Sousuke complied willingly, and Kaname wrapped a towel and vinyl sheet around his neck. She had already finished changing and was now wearing a light T-shirt and jeans.

“You doing okay?”

“Yes, there’s no problem.”

“O-kay then, let’s do this. Heh heh heh heh...” she said with a mischievous smile, taking the scissors in her hand.

Sousuke then became uneasy for an entirely different reason than enemies or assassins.

“Chidori, have you... do you have experience cutting hair?” he asked.

“Nope,” she answered frankly, “but I’ve played around with Kyouko’s hair before. This is my first time cutting, though.”

“...”

“Don’t worry. It’s better than you cutting your own hair, at least.”

“Please don’t cut my ears off.”

“Okay, I’ll try not to if at all possible,” and with a laugh, she pinched up some of his hair and cut. Then again. She was a

little hesitant to start out with, but then gradually got into a rhythm, snipping here and there.

“Hey, Sousuke...” Kaname said without stopping, “Did you miss school the other day because you had a job?”

“Yes.”

“Did you have to fight again?”

“Yes... what about it?”

“Nothing. Did you get hurt?”

“Just some light scratches. It’s not a problem.”

“I see...”

For a while, she was silent as she continued cutting his hair. She would look at his head in the mirror, occasionally muttering “mmm...” to herself. She would then make a difficult face and go back in with the scissors. The cut hair had fallen off of the vinyl sheet and was scattered all over the place.

“Well, I...” Kaname uttered finally, “I heard from Tessa that you’re not the only one protecting me.”

This was the first time she had brought up the subject. She had probably been thinking about it ever since their conversation on the way home.

“I see.”

“But... it doesn’t feel that way at all, does it? I mean, it doesn’t seem real sometimes. It’s like... everything that’s happened up till now, as well as the whole Mithril thing, has all been a lie.”

Sousuke’s mission here in Tokyo had simply become “Guard Kaname”. However, that didn’t mean that he was the only one keeping an eye on her. Mithril’s Intelligence Department also had sent an agent who was always hidden somewhere nearby. It was thanks to this agent that Sousuke was able to leave Kaname to go on overseas missions.

Sousuke, Kalinin, and everyone else in the Operations Department called this agent “Wraith”.

“Have you met this person before?”

“No. I’ve never talked to him, either.”

“Do you know who it is?”

“No. Probably someone you don’t know.”

“I wonder if I can trust him.”

“ ... ”

“...that’s to say, him and Mithril and everything.” A heavy, uneasy feeling hung in those words. Although Kaname was normally upbeat and cheerful, she was frightened- Sousuke was able to pick up on it just then. If he seriously thought about Kaname’s present situation and how she was being targeted, he knew that she would only be able to depend on Mithril. The police couldn’t help her.

“Of course you can. You should trust him,” he answered, but without any faith in his own words.

Wraith was always far away.

He was outside of the school while she was in class. After she returned home, he was several blocks away from her apartment. Without being too close or too far, he was guarding her from somewhere. It was because of this that Sousuke didn’t have to stay stuck by her side day and night.

This agent never responded to them, though. No matter what happened.

Even when Kaname herself was in danger, Wraith wouldn’t act. So far, when she had been mixed up in problems on the street, gone into unknown characters’ houses, even when the terrorist group A21 had abducted her, Wraith hadn’t moved. It always ended up that Kaname was safe afterwards, but Sousuke was extremely irritated after these incidents.

Why doesn't he move?

Why doesn't he come to protect her in my place?

In his written reports to his superiors, Sousuke had repeatedly stated "I have serious doubts about the ability of the agent from the Intelligence Department, code name: 'Wraith'." However, his reply was always the same: "Under Investigation. Resume Mission as before." Neither Kalinin nor Tessa had tried to explain this decision. "It's okay, just carry on as usual," they would say persistently. That's why Sousuke always felt very anxious when he had to leave Kaname. Just leave everything to Wraith ...those were his orders, but he didn't believe that Wraith was carrying out his duty.

Was Wraith patiently waiting for the real enemy to appear? What if he was just using Kaname as bait until a bigger fish nibbled and no matter how the float bobbed up and down, he had no intentions of reeling it in? If that were so, he understood why Wraith hadn't shown himself before now.

No, that's absurd.

If Kaname were to die before then, wouldn't he lose everything he was working for? It was horrifying to remember, but up until now she had been exposed to many dangers where she would have died if he had made a mistake. Even then, Wraith had not lifted a finger to help. What was the reason for that...?

He didn't know.

Suspicious, coldhearted logic was at work somewhere. Despite the Intelligence Department's assurances, were they not hiding something from him...?

"Sousuke?" Kaname called out to him, pulling him out of his thoughts.

"Hmm..?"

"What's wrong? You seem to be thinking about something."

“It’s nothing...”

“About what I just said, don’t worry too much, okay? I know I said that, but...” she stopped cutting and hesitated for a moment. It was almost like she was working up some courage after that- and looking away from the mirror, she said:

“I trust you completely.”

A strange sensation overcame him. It was an unknown sensation, warm and tender, and it felt as if his heart had suddenly tightened in his chest- that was the feeling. His face was hot, and he felt as if something were welling up from deep within his body.

Why, he wondered. There was something sentimental about it.

What was this kind of feeling called...?

He couldn’t remember.

“...thank you,” he barely managed to say.

“You’re welcome,” she said in a in a relieved tone of voice, and resumed cutting.

“...let’s see, could you turn to your right a little?”

“Hm? Okay.”

“Not that way, the other way.”

She pressed her thin fingers softly against Sousuke’s cheek. The sensation of her cold fingertips on his skin felt good, like a small breeze drifting through a dense tropical forest.

In the corner of his eye, he could see his black hair and Kaname’s white T-shirt moving. It was a pretty cheap T-shirt made of material so thin that you could see through it in the light. As she moved in front of him to try to cut the hair on his forehead, the contour of her body from her armpit down to her hip was slightly visible through the shirt. It was a sleek and slender curve. Sousuke quickly looked down as if he had just looked at the sun.



“Heh heh, I’m really getting the hang of this now...” she said, her style becoming more refined from when she started.

She cut his hair with a pair of round-tipped scissors, and then used a razor to even it out in the back. After she was finished cutting, she began diligently combing his hair- as she did so, Sousuke became drowsy.

What’s wrong with me... he thought.

Even though there’s a person holding a sharp object this close to me, I’m getting sleepy.

I am. Me.

I can’t believe it.

But, what is this indescribable ease that I’m feeling?

Chidori. Perhaps I’m-

“Okay, now to rinse off.”

She pushed his head down into the sink and doused it in cold water. His drowsiness was quickly cured.

“Not too shabby, I think,” she nodded, turning the dryer on.

“Doesn’t look like it changed much to me,” Sousuke commented, looking in the mirror with a serious expression.

His hair was shorter than it was before to be sure, but he didn’t think that his overall look had changed at all. He looked as he had just a month earlier. His hair was still as disheveled and all over the place as ever. And the length on both sides seemed to be asymmetrical now.

“What are you talking about? It looks very different.”

“Really...?”

“Yup. It looks much better. Listen to what everyone says at school tomorrow about it.”

“Hmm...”

After one more hard look in the mirror, Sousuke stood up.

“In any case, I appreciate it. I’ll cut your hair next time when I get the chance.”

“That’s a definite negative,” Kaname said, grimacing.

He helped her clean up the bathroom, and after they ate a light meal, he said goodbye.

He somehow regretted having to leave.

It was dark when he left her apartment. It was probably past eight already, but there were still many people out on the sidewalks: business men coming home from work, elementary school students coming back from cram school^{*5}, couples walking their dogs. He cut through the flow of these people, and headed towards his apartment in the building across the street from Kaname’s.

For some reason, his step was lighter. No, he was in high spirits.

His morale had been lifted... that was probably the best way to phrase it. Just a few hours earlier, his mind had been filled with thoughts of Wraith, work, and what Mao had said about his future, there shouldn’t have been any room in there for anything else.

But it was different now. ‘Why not go for it’ was what his feelings had turned into.

Guarding Kaname. Adapting to society. Training at Merida Island. As well as combat. He would try to manage them all as best as he could.

She was depending on him. What would happen if he didn’t have confidence in himself?

That’s right...

He could worry about this stuff next week.

He still had a mountain of work to do. First, he would go home and send today’s report to Merida Island. Next he would get some equipment and weapons and check the sensors set up around

the neighborhood. After he finished with that, he would then study for his make-up exams.

He quickly returned home, turned on his satellite-link laptop computer, and typed up a simple report in five minutes. After running it through a strong encryption program, he immediately sent it. It wasn't long before he received the message "Transmission Complete", along with another, separate encrypted file.

"...?"

The file was an "Orders Message" from headquarters.

TOP PRIORITY ORDERS (98J005-3128)

191121Z

From = Western Pacific Fleet Headquarters (Merida Island Base)

To = Uruz 7 / Sergeant Sousuke Sagara

A: Operations, Command, and Fleet headquarters have cancelled current operation orders 98E001-3128 (Operation name: Guardian Angel) as of 1500 hours (GMT).

B: Uruz 7 is to withdraw from location safe-house and take route 38 back to Merida Island Base with all due speed.

C: A letter of resignation is to be sent to the point of infiltration – Jindai High School – reasons for withdrawal are left to Uruz 7's discretion.

D: Guard duty of Kaname Chidori will be taken over by Agent code name "Wraith".

E: Contact with Kaname Chidori is prohibited as of today 1500 hours (GMT).

-END

Sousuke rubbed his eyes and read the message again.

Its contents didn't change. No matter how many times he read it, or how many ways he tried to interpret it, it was the same as before.

His mission of guarding Kaname was over for good- that's what it said.

“Operations Headquarters” meant that it was the decision of characters who outranked both Tessa and Kalinin, so no protest that Sousuke could make would have any effect.

“...”

Sousuke stood there motionless staring at the LCD screen for several minutes. It may have even been more than ten minutes.

There was only the sound of his teeth grinding against each other.

“Guard duty of Kaname Chidori will be taken over by Agent code name “Wraith”.”

Before he knew it, he had slammed his fist down on top of the computer. Its metal frame bent and keys went flying up into the air, scattering all over the place. His fit of rage continued to spur him on.

He left the computer, which now smelled like smoke, and headed straight to the veranda. He slid open the glass door, grabbed the handrail with both hands and surveyed the neighborhood.

“Where are you...?” he muttered, his shoulders heaving in anger.

It was a residential area at night. There was nothing out of the ordinary, just a quiet night-

“Come out, Wraith! Come out and speak to me!!” Sousuke yelled at the top of his lungs.

He may have been mad, but there was no point in this. Even if he vented to someone, his orders wouldn’t change... he understood that, but could not keep quiet.

“I know you’re here somewhere! Why don’t you answer me!?”



「ミスリル」からの予期せぬ命令。
液晶画面に表示された無機質な言葉の羅列。
宗介の中に激しい感情が吹き荒れた。

Unexpected orders from Mithril. An expressionless message is read back over an LCD screen. Sousuke's feelings blow up in a violent rage.

His voice resounded throughout the neighborhood. The people passing by on the streets below looked up and asked, “What’s that?”

There was no response. Sousuke knew that just yelling like this would never get Wraith to show himself, so he took a different approach.

“My name is Sergeant Sousuke Sagara! My post is Mithril Operations’ Western Pacific Fleet’s *Tuatha de Danaan*! I was ordered to guard a certain person, and was sent here to Tokyo on April 20th! I can think of the following reasons why she would be targeted! One! She’s one of a special group of people called the ‘Whispered’! Two! The ‘Whispered’ are believed to have connections to the military, but the information is not yet known as to-”

Suddenly the phone in his room started ringing.

He quickly stopped yelling and returned inside, calmly picking up the phone and pressing the talk button. The other party shouted at him right away.

“You bastard, what the hell are you doing!?”

It was a deep, synthesized voice. He was using an electronic voice changer. He sounded like a monster, but Sousuke knew that he had called him out of anger.

He was speaking to Wraith- the other agent who had been sent by the Intelligence Department.

“Where’s the agent who’s shouting classified information across the area? This is clearly interfering with the operation!”

“You were ignoring me,” Sousuke replied in a cold voice.

“You should be able to understand the danger in us talking like this. Uruz 7, what you’re doing right now is-”

“Answer me. Is your mission to guard Kaname Chidori, or simply to observe her?”

“You aren’t qualified for that information.”

“Then I guess you don’t mind if I go back out on the veranda and continue shouting out what I know for the rest of the night. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

“Don’t try to threaten me, Uruz 7. I’ll file an official complaint to the Operations Department myself.”

“Do what you want. But you’ll answer my question.”

Sousuke heard the other party click his tongue. After a moment’s hesitation, Wraith seemed to have gotten the idea that Sousuke was serious and replied:

“Guarding her, of course.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“It’s up to you what you believe, but the mission I was given, code name ‘Angel’, is being handed over to my department, and you are interfering with it. It’s as simple as that.”

“Then why haven’t you helped her? She’s been in dangerous situations many times up until now.”

“Those were just incidents with petty gangsters. There’s no reason for me to come out for street quarrels.”

“I see. Then how do you explain the A21 incident? Even then you didn’t try to rescue her.”

After he said this, Sousuke suddenly heard him say “you” ...or maybe it was “you people”.

“ ... ”

“What’s the matter? Answer me.”

“Even though I had intended to let the enemy move around, the situation went beyond my control. You also made me nervous during the fight at the Fushimi Academy, but the situation was resolved without my interference. It seemed that at both times no one recognized the girl’s importance. It’s the same situation with the gangsters.”

“You’re just twisting the truth. It seems to me that you don’t have any serious intentions of protecting her.”

“I don’t care if you like me or not, just as long as you don’t bother me,” the synthetic voice scoffed at him. “The Intelligence Department should have been in charge of this operation and everything after the Shun On incident from the very start. The Operations Department butted in there, so we let you stay. Your people say that you’re effective as a decoy, but you’ve been nothing but an annoyance to me. You’ve posed as a problem so many times that I’ve thought of killing you myself.”

“It’s not too late now. Do it.”

“I was just kidding. I don’t think I’d get out unharmed in a fight with you. Though you have allowed me my favorite pastime.”

“What?”

“Since I sit undercover at a distance pointing my rifle in your direction, I can make you extremely uneasy just by moving the bolt on my machine gun. You have a magnificent instinct for battle, but it’s because of that that you screw up so much. I enjoyed myself today, too, watching you at the barbershop.”

“You bastard...”

“Don’t get so mad. It’s a done deal now,” he said with a hint of triumph in his voice. “Either way, the fun ends today. You are to return to base and get back to your original missions so I can continue with my job. Both of us are professionals, so why don’t we stop this petty argument?”

“I can’t do that. What about Chidori’s safety?”

“That’s no longer your concern. You’ve officially been ordered to withdraw. You’re really not planning on disobeying orders, are you?”

“I...” Sousuke faltered.

“Don’t forget that Mithril is the one that put you here. You’re not really a high school student; you’re just a mercenary-an assassin. Your family history, school history, all of it was forged. Everything about you is a lie.”

“ ... ”

“From the very beginning, you’ve criticized me, but do you really believe that someone like you can protect her? For six months you haven’t been able to adapt to Japanese society at all. Your being here is an unnecessary risk to the girl.”

Sousuke felt the impact of these words. All at once it felt as if the air around him had grown heavy and sticky.

Wraith had a point.

“Your guard duty has been worse than third-rate. The girl will only get hurt eventually, not to mention the innocent bystanders who may get involved, as well.”

“ ... ”

“Playtime’s at an end. Follow your orders and return to base,” and without a word from Sousuke, Wraith hung up.

Sousuke dejectedly put down the phone.

Shortly thereafter, feelings of incompetence and helplessness came crashing down on him.

Translator’s Notes:

1. Kanji are the Chinese characters used in Japanese writing.
2. Sekitori are ranking sumo wrestlers in the senior or junior divisions.
3. Juuryou is a junior sumo wrestler.
4. Rizado haircut is kind of like a gang style, think John Travolta’s hair in Grease.
5. Cram school is a school that students go to after regular school in order to prepare for entrance exams.

Chapter 3: Black and White

October 20th, 08:10 (Japan Standard Time)

Choufu-shi, Tokyo, Japan

Jindai High School

“Morning, Kyouko!” Kaname said as soon as she saw Kyouko at Sengawa Station, clapping her on the back.

“Morning. You seem cheerful this morning, Kaname,” Kyouko mumbled sleepily through a yawn.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Did something good happen?”

“No, not really... or did it? There wouldn’t be anything that interesting, would there? Heh heh.”

“Huh? You’re acting strange.”

Kaname and Kyouko walked out to the street crowded with other students commuting to school.

Unfortunately, it was raining that day, and the air was chilly. As she stood next to Kyouko and pulled out her umbrella, Kaname felt a little uneasy. Because her friend was so much shorter than her, the top of Kyouko’s umbrella was right in her line of sight.

“Yesterday was a mess. Sagara hasn’t changed at all,” Kyouko said after they had walked for a bit. Kaname nodded.

“I know. He hasn’t gotten better at all. No matter how many times I tell him, I’m just wasting my breath. I’m starting to wish that I could send an electric shock to his head with some kind of remote control, so that every time he does something careless, I could punish him. Who knows? It might be effective-”

“Ha ha ha. But since he’s not a dog... by the way, what happened after I left?”

“Hm? W... we went home. What about it?” Kaname pretended. She somehow felt too shy to talk about how she went out of her way to invite him over and give him a haircut.

Come to think of it, hadn’t that been rather bold? She normally wouldn’t go that far to be nice to any of her other male friends... if everyone in class found out, wouldn’t they be curiously cold to her again...?

...oh well

When she met up with Sousuke, she would instruct him to make up a story about cutting it himself, and that would settle it. It wouldn’t be a problem...

“Well, you seem to be in a good mood-”

“Who is?”

“You are.”

“Heh? I-it’s just your imagination. Uh wa ha ha ha...”

“Ah. You’re acting suspicious.”

That was as far as that conversation went. They moved on to other topics, and during the climax of their talk about the Japan Series, the two passed through the main gate of the school. They then changed into their indoor shoes and went to class.

Kaname laid her bag on her desk and looked around the room.

Sousuke wasn’t there.

I guess he hasn’t come yet...

She glanced at her watch. It was 8:27. Class was about to start.

What is he doing?

She wanted to know what everyone’s reaction would be when they saw him.

While she was talking with some of her fellow classmates, the school bell chimed. Bustling around, the students took their seats.

Sousuke's seat was still empty.

Late again? Really, he's such an idiot. It's almost time for his make-up exams, too...

Feeling a little disappointed, Kaname opened her book.

Sousuke didn't show up that period, or the next.

He never showed up.



October 20th, 17:19 (Pacific Standard Time)
Merida Island Base

Tessa was looking over some documents in her office on base when the intercom on her desk buzzed. It was the secretary in the next room.

"Yes?"

"Madame Captain, Sergeant Sagara has arrived."

Since his direct superior, Lieutenant Commander Kalinin, wasn't on base, he had come here to report back. The Lieutenant Commander was still at the Operations Headquarters in Sydney. He had remained there to discuss equipment related issues with the engineers from Ross & Humbleton.

"...let him in."

"Yes Ma'am."

She put down the receiver and temporarily turned off the holo-screen projector displaying the documents she had been looking over. They were the test plans for a new submarine

communications system- a VME bus receiver, and were still highly confidential. Sousuke Sagara was not qualified to read them.

She felt depressed.

The one who had given him the order to return to base had been none other than herself. It reflected the intentions of the Admiral and the Operations Department, so it couldn't be avoided, but it appeared as if she had split Sousuke and Kaname apart herself. Since it was a fact that she was jealous of their relationship, she felt all the more guilty for it.

If only Kalinin had come back... she thought to herself, and then was disappointed in her own weakness. She had been the one to issue the order, but she wanted to hide in the shadow of her subordinate. Wasn't that enough to disqualify her as a captain?

But how could she look at him when she saw him?

She had been thinking about that ever since she had returned from Sydney, but no good idea had come to her.

"Excuse me," Sousuke said as he entered the room. He walked up straight in front of her desk and saluted her. She returned the salute, and he quickly put his right hand down and stood at attention.

"Good work. At ease."

"Yes, Ma'am," he said, and quickly stood at ease.

Sousuke's attitude towards his superiors was always like this, but she sensed he was being more polite than necessary today. It was as if he had just first come in contact with a commissioned officer, she thought... or was she just thinking too much...?

They were both silent for a while.

A long, long silence.

Sousuke was not looking at Tessa. He stared straight at the large map behind her, bending back.

Even though they were well acquainted with each other.
Even though they were the same age.

The very act of being overly polite seemed to be his silent protest.

“Have you come to talk about being separated from Kaname...?” she said, breaking the silence.

“...Yes,” he answered vaguely, adding, “Would you please explain?” while still looking at the map.

Tessa clinched her fists with all of her strength, and began the beyond painful explanation.

“...It was the decision of my superiors as well as myself. Now that the Tokyo Department of Intelligence is prepared, there is no longer any reason for you to remain with Kaname.”

“I don’t believe so. The protection of the Department of Intelligence alone is insufficient.”

“That’s not true. It seems that you are underestimating the importance of your position. But more importantly, I would be ignoring my responsibility as your commanding officer by allowing you to stick with a mission that is neither effective nor certain. You should be focusing on your other work.”

“What work is that?”

If there’s a mission more important than guarding Kaname, I want to hear it right away... was the look that he was giving her.

“The Arbalest,” Tessa replied, and Sousuke’s mouth remained tightly shut.

“I want you to give your undivided attention to taking care of that machine. The Arbalest won’t accept any other pilot except you.”

“...”

“In the Shun On incident, your brain waves were recorded into the Lambda Driver. Actually, ‘imprinted’ would be more

accurate... the entire system had been clean up until then, and the first time you used it, the Arbalest matched up with you and reorganized itself. The instant you piloted it, the quasi-nerve network that makes up the machine's structural system copied your nervous system via the TAROS. Now that structure cannot be altered."

"I don't understand."

"In other words, the Arbalest became your alter-ego from the first time you piloted it," she said, making the back of her chair squeak. "Right now, Mithril does not have the power to build new ASes equipped with Lambda Drivers. In other words, you and the Arbalest are the only ones able to oppose enemy units like the 'Venom' and 'Behemoth'. Now that we've handed the guard of Kaname over to the Intelligence Department, I want you to focus on mastering the Arbalest," she finished explaining very patiently.

Sousuke drooped his head and let out a small sigh.

"Does that mean I have no other choice?"

"I'm afraid so..." Tessa replied half-heartedly. "Please try to understand, Sagara."

"Is that an order?"

When she heard those bitter words, Tessa felt as if she had been struck in the head with a hammer. *He said it on purpose. He said that kind of thing on purpose to criticize me. Even though he came to me looking for an explanation, he has the nerve to say "Is that an order?" It's nothing less than blatantly rejecting our relationship as friends.*

However, him being angry- well, it was her problem.

"Yes, it is," she said. Without noticing it, her voice grew louder. "If it means you'll comprehend it, I'll give you orders or whatever. Since doing so is only natural, of course. I never do you

any favors at all. Even though it meant taking you away from Kaname, it was a necessary measure so I did it.”

“Captain...?”

Sousuke looked slightly confused, but Tessa didn’t stop, and burst out all at once:

“You don’t understand how things work up at the top. I can’t do anything alone, since, as you see, I’m just a little girl. But you don’t know about things like structure or politics or bargaining, do you!? It must be nice. You take it easy, because if you have a grudge against me you have the luxury of thinking about other things. But I can’t, because not only do I have to think about my own safety, but I also have to think about the safety of the entire crew!! Okay? Try thinking about that. You fought with Venom and Behemoth, so you understand, right!? M9s alone don’t stand a chance against ASes equipped with Lambda Drivers, do they!? And someone else might die the next time an enemy appears...! My subordinates! It might be Melissa, or Weber. There’s the danger that the entire landing force would be annihilated in an instant. But I cannot allow such a thing to happen!!”

She could see Sousuke’s figure through an obscure haze. Her words had come spilling out like water from a ruptured dam. Her voice cracked, and went out of control.

Ah, this is terrible. I’m crying. This kind of leadership is unheard of. It’s the worst. No matter how many times she thought these things, the flood of emotions just would not stop.

“I see...”

“What are you looking at? Can you think of nothing but her? Can’t you think about my feelings just a little bit?”

“I... I’m terribly sorry, Captain. I am-”

“Stop it!!” she yelled, her eyes burning. “You’re the worst. You pretend to be the kind, quiet type, but really you’re just selfish.

You're lying to me. Why don't you just come out and say it? 'I want to stay with her, so don't get in my way'!"



When she said this, Sousuke was suddenly taken aback, stunned. His eyes blinked, his neck trembled, and his mouth opened and closed while he was trying to think of what he should say.

“Because... it would be better... if you just said that...”

She couldn’t talk after that. She noticed that she had stood up without realizing it, and drained of her strength, she flopped back down in her chair.

“I’m sorry... Captain. I will reconsider everything. My state of affairs... and... present circumstances... and something... my naïveté or what you called it... or...”

Sousuke’s entire body had stiffened up, and as he tried to squeeze out one word after the other, the intercom on Tessa’s desk buzzed again.

Wiping her tears off on the cuff of her sleeve, Tessa slowly picked up the receiver.

“What is it...?”

“Captain, Lieutenant Clouseau is here,” said the secretary, second Lieutenant Vilan.

“Could you please... wait just a moment. I’ll call him in soon.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

After she put down the receiver, Tessa took out some pocket tissues and blew her nose. Sniffling, she dried her eyes on her cuff again and resentfully muttered, “I hate you, Sagara...”

“...I’m sorry.”

“And I hate how you always apologize so quickly...”

“...excuse me.”

“I have nothing more to say to you. You’re dismissed.”

“...yes Ma’am,” he said, and dejectedly left her office.

When the door shut, she found herself yet again wracked by an enormous amount of self-guilt.

She had gone so far as to snap at her subordinate, cut him down and scream at him. It wasn't just indecent- it was downright shameful. This was the first time she had ever acted so disgracefully. It was only good fortune that no one else had been around to witness it.

At any rate, she had said many horrible things very bluntly and without any reservation at all. It was possible that he hated her completely, now.

Tessa regained her composure, taking a full three minutes before she was able to straighten herself back out again. After she glanced in the mirror to check her appearance, she called the secretary to let the visitor in.

The door through which Sousuke had just exited opened again, and a tall black man came in and saluted.

“Belfangan Clouseau reporting.”

“Welcome to the Western Pacific Fleet, Lieutenant. I am the commander of the fleet, Teletha Testarossa,” she said without mentioning anything about the previous trouble, and returned his salute.

“Your name precedes you, Captain. I’m delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“I’m delighted to make yours, as well... have you already seen your new post?”

“No. By the way... that Sergeant earlier- was he Sousuke Sagara?”

He had probably encountered him while he was waiting in the next room, and was asking in order to confirm who he was.

“...Yes. I guess it would have been better if I had introduced you.”

“There’s no need, since I will be meeting ‘them’ soon enough,” he said with a grin.



“So... you’re saying that you made Tessa cry this time?” Kurz said, his eyes widening. He was sitting in the counter corner seat in the only bar on base.

“That’s... affirmative,” replied Sousuke, who was sitting next to him. His shoulders were drooped, his head was hung, and he was staring vaguely at his glass of grapefruit juice on the counter.

“You really have the talent for a gigolo, you know that?”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t worry about it. Besides... hmmm. Honestly. Nevermind.”

He crossed his arms, overcome by emotion, and threw Sousuke a sidelong glance.

“I guess you enjoy it...”

The time before when Sousuke had made Kaname cry, Kurz had suddenly punched him. Sousuke didn’t understand the motives for his partner’s actions sometimes.

“Nevermind. Do you think you were wrong?”

“I... guess so.”

“Then don’t worry about it too much. Tessa’s not a bad girl- she’ll forgive you someday,” he said lightly, and drank his scotch.

The bar was crowded with PRTs (Primary Response Team) who had finished their training, as well as equipment team members who were able to finish their work. They were sharing their silly boasts and funny stories about the girls they picked up in

Guam. Course laughter and various languages flew around the room, and the entire place was filled with a thick cloud of cigarette smoke.

“I don’t compare with the Captain,” Sousuke said after a bit. “I didn’t understand anything about the heavy responsibility she carries. The way she was... it was my attitude that made her so angry.”

“I don’t think that was the only reason she was crying,” Kurz replied sarcastically, puckering his lips up to Sousuke.

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“Nevermind, it’s too annoying to explain.”

“...?”

“You really don’t get it?” he said in a shocked voice, “See... that’s why she’s angry.”

With that, Sousuke’s shoulders drooped even more.

“I knew it... I really am an idiot. The Captain’s assertions were correct. There really is no reason for me to continue pointlessly guarding Kaname. When you think about who the right man for the job is, what they’ve done so far... it really is strange.”

Kurz frowned as he listened to Sousuke’s monologue, but then shrugged his shoulders and said almost to himself, “It’s no use.”

“Eh? What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing. Just forget it,” he replied, then steered the conversation to agree with Sousuke.

“Well, no matter how good of an SRT member you are, having to test a new model AS and guard a girl at the same time is nonsense...”

“You’re right. However...”

“However?”

Kurz pressed him to continue, but Sousuke just gripped his glass and muttered, “No. It’s nothing,” and was quiet.

Even though he was talking to Kurz about it, he couldn’t help it. He had been confronted by a personal dilemma. Orders, duty, her, his bad prospects for the future, this and that. Although he talked about them, no solutions were presenting themselves.

But really, he wanted to tell everything to his colleague without reserve.

Kaname trusted him. She didn’t depend on the Department of Intelligence, she depended on him. Now it looked as if he had readily betrayed that trust. He understood the necessity of the Arbalest, and that he and it were the only ones who could go up against Venom and Behemoth, just as the Captain had said. It was better to leave Kaname’s protection to the experts at the Department of Intelligence, however...

He couldn’t be satisfied. Not with just those reasons. Not with just that rationale.

No matter how many times he tried to solve this simple equation, he only got the same answer. The solution was tactically correct. But why did that correct answer bother him so much...?

“What’s wrong? If it’s a complaint, I’ll listen to it. Just try me.”

“No... it’s okay.”

“...you really are strange, you know that? Well, I’ve thought that for-” he started, but this time Kurz was the one who suddenly shut up.

“What is it?”

“Nu-thin’,” he said, and with a careless smile, he finished off his scotch.

“...So, did you say anything to Kaname before you left?”

“Mm... yes.”

“Did she cry? I don’t think she would’ve been smiling.”

“I... don’t want to talk about it.”

In truth, he had not said anything to Kaname. Not one word- nothing about leaving at all. What kind of explanation could he give her after the kind of talk they had when she gave him a haircut? He just wasn’t able to gather up the courage to face her. He had gone ahead and sent the letter to the school about dropping out, but he had only moved most of his belongings to a place outside of the city.

Because he hadn’t been able to make up his mind, he had left everything as it was.

At a former battleground, he wouldn’t have worried about such things and would have finished it.

“Ah, I see...”

Kurz then quickly backed off to Sousuke’s surprise. He said “I’ll have another” to the barkeeper, and, joining in with the idle slander around him, he laughed out loud disinterestedly.

Just then, the tone of the rowdy barroom crowd went down a notch.

Suddenly the sounds of rude jeering and silverware banging against tables filled the room, singing and talking ceased, and the atmosphere of the room changed to that of vague animosity. It was very much like one of those squalid barroom scenes that you would see in an old western movie, but the hostility here was a bit different. First off, this wasn’t a place in which shady characters hung around. This was more of a response to casual, small occurrences.

They soon understood the reason. An officer- one whom they didn’t know, had entered the bar.

The officer was a black man wearing field clothes. There was a badge on his shoulder with the letters “FLT” embroidered on

it. He was a Lieutenant. His shoulders were broad and solid, his physique looking almost like an upside-down triangle, and his legs were very long. Even from a distance he was a tall man, probably a good 10 centimeters taller than Kurz, who stood at 180 centimeters tall.

“Haven’t seen him around. Wonder where he’s from?”

Kurz mumbled. Sousuke felt as if he’d seen him somewhere before. Was he the man that he’d seen outside of Testarossa’s office earlier...?

The man crossed the room, and pushing his way across the backs of Sousuke and the others, sat down at the very center of the counter right next to Kurz.

“I’ll have a water,” he ordered, placing a five-dollar bill on the table. The barkeeper gave him a look of open discomfort.

“That’s dumb. This is a bar, we serve alcohol- get it? Alcohol.”

“Alcohol goes against the teachings of Allah. I’ll have a water.”

“Then don’t be coming into bars, it’s stupid,” the middle-aged barkeeper said, but poured a bottle of Volvic into a tumbler and set it down hard on the counter. Taking the glass, the man gave a bold look to Sousuke and the others. After that it seemed he lost interest in them, and facing front again he drank his water.

For some reason, he seemed to have an air of wisdom about him. His skin was brown, and in his eyes one could see intelligence without weakness. His lips were thin and drawn up tight. He looked as if though he had both Caucasian and Arabian blood in him.

“Ah... excuse me, Lieutenant,” Kurz said to him, “I don’t want to say anything at the risk of sounding stingy since you don’t know anyone here, but could you move to another seat?”

“Why should I?”

“The three seats here at this corner of the counter are our humble SRT reserved seats, and you’re sitting right in the middle of them.”

“Is that a corps regulation, I wonder?”

He wasn’t directing this question at Kurz so much as to the barkeeper. The barkeeper just frowned and shook his head.

“We just decided it on our own. Although the seats over at that table and the seats at the other end of the counter have also been claimed by members of other stations. We do that so those who come here are adequately assigned a place to sit.”

“So it’s custom, then?”

“That’s one way of saying it. It’s a relatively new one. But you see, the seat that you’re sitting in, you might wanna call it ‘reserved’.”

“I don’t get your meaning.”

“An officer who died used to sit there a lot,” Kurz said. “I’m sorry, but I don’t want to have to kick a complete stranger’s ass.”

“I see,” the man said, looking down. “And what was the call sign and name of this dead officer?”

“Uruz 1. Captain Gail McAllen.”

“Then there’s no need for me to move. He was a coward,” the man said with a cold grin on his face.

“What did you say...?”

Kurz leaned forward. Sousuke, who had been observing the argument beside him, didn’t miss as his partner powerfully gripped the shot glass that he was holding in his hand.

“A coward? Did you just say he was a coward?”

“That’s right. He was incompetent and petty, as well.”

“Wow. Ha ha... those are some pretty strong words there. Hey, did you hear that, Sousuke? He said Gail was incompetent and petty. Well, it is true that when it came to that old man-” Kurz remarked lightly, but then suddenly took the shot glass and threw its contents in the man’s face, throwing a right punch at the same time. It was a feat that even Sousuke would have been barely able to stop. However, Kurz’s fist did not collide with the man’s right cheek. In literally a fraction of a second, the man had dodged the blow.

“ ... ”

The man was suddenly right next to Kurz, and hit him squarely in the jaw.

He wasn’t able to see anything but that movement- but in the next instant, Kurz went flying backwards. It seemed he would collide with Sousuke, but instead went crashing into some chairs at a table a few meters behind him.

There was a terrible racket as plates and glasses shattered on the floor. The barkeeper grimaced and shook his head, while the other patrons looked cautiously in the direction of the commotion.

“Is that all you got, Sergeant?” the Lieutenant asked, wiping the liquor off of his face with a paper napkin. “I’d heard that there was a sharpshooter here, but is this some kind of joke?”

“You bastard... let’s get on with it!” Kurz yelled, and grabbing the overturned table, he tried to get up. But just as he had stood halfway-

“...!?”

His knees suddenly buckled underneath him. It was as if an invisible hand had hit him in the back of the head. He fell back on his hips, and collapsing, weakly muttered “dammit-”. He didn’t move.

“Kurz...!” Sousuke said, and started to rush over to him.



“Leave him alone. It’s just a slight concussion,” the Lieutenant called out to Sousuke’s back. “But I’m surprised that he took a hit like that and still stood up. It’s a good lesson to a fool who’d get drunk and strike an officer. A good one for him, for the dead captain, and for all the idiots of the SRT here. What a disappointment.”

Sousuke turned to face the man, who wasn’t even trying to hide his contempt, and gave him a piercing stare.

“What’s with that look?”

“I don’t know who you are, and I apologize for my colleague’s behavior. But I’ll have you take back what you said about Captain McAllen.”

Although he was normally not one to react to general abuse, Sousuke could no longer keep silent now.

“That’s a funny joke, Sergeant. You giving me an order?”

“...”

“What would you do if I said no? Try to hit a superior officer? You probably can’t. I just saw you; you’re a serious man. Or maybe you’re just a coward.”

Sousuke clicked his tongue. It was as if the man had read his inner conflict.

If he hit him, he’d be sent to the barracks. However, that in and of itself was insignificant. Even Kurz had thought that.

The reason that Sousuke was hesitating right now wasn’t because of the threat of punishment. Basically, it came down to the fact that he was strongly opposed to the act of “breaking the rules” itself.

Hitting a superior officer. Disobeying orders. If he did it just once, the world of order and regulation in which he surrounded himself would crumble to pieces- and that feeling of impending danger would halt his emotions. Always.

That's what I've been doing up until now. Why can't I move...? he asked himself.

"I think you won't do anything unless you've been ordered to," the Lieutenant said, "that's why, Sergeant. Why don't we play a little game, then?"

"Game...?"

"You want to protect Captain McAllen's honor or whatever, don't you? I was just getting bored. Follow me."

The Lieutenant then placed a hundred dollar bill on the counter and walked out.

"Where are we-"

"To the AS hanger. You're qualified to pilot one, aren't you?"



He did a good job of provoking me into this... thought Sousuke.

Right now he was sitting in the cockpit of the ARX-7 Arbalest, riding the elevator up to the ground level of Merida Island.

It was a simple yet enormous elevator, with its rusted steel showing through.

Most of the facilities on the base were constructed underground. The living quarters, assorted communication facilities, weapons ammunitions, the *Tuatha de Danaan*'s maintenance dock, and so on... most everything. Most of what was above ground was as of yet untouched expansive jungle, but there were things such as the runway and communications antenna, which were cleverly disguised and hidden. You could almost fit

the entire island into the area of Tokyo's Yamate Line- sufficient to serve as the training ground for the landing force.

The Arbalest had been restored back to white again. The dark gray paint had been completely stripped off during the fight that took place inside the ship in late August. The technical officer who had seen it said, "That's proof that it was powered by the Lambda Driver." The paint coming off seemed to have something to do with the mysterious force field that Lambda Driver generated, which made it to where regular paint would not adhere to the Arbalest's armor.

He checked the M9 using the same procedures as usual.

Generator- normal.

Control system- normal.

Vetrononics- normal.

Sensors, propulsion system, shock-absorption system, coolant system, FCS, warning systems- all normal.

He had only one weapon- a training knife stored in the equipment hatch underneath his left side.

The elevator reached ground level.

He was in a 12-meter tall cage disguised to blend in with the foliage around it. Sousuke moved the machine out of the cage and onto the damp earth. Zu-don, Zu-don, the sound of the heavy footsteps springing up off of the mud reverberated throughout the surrounding area.

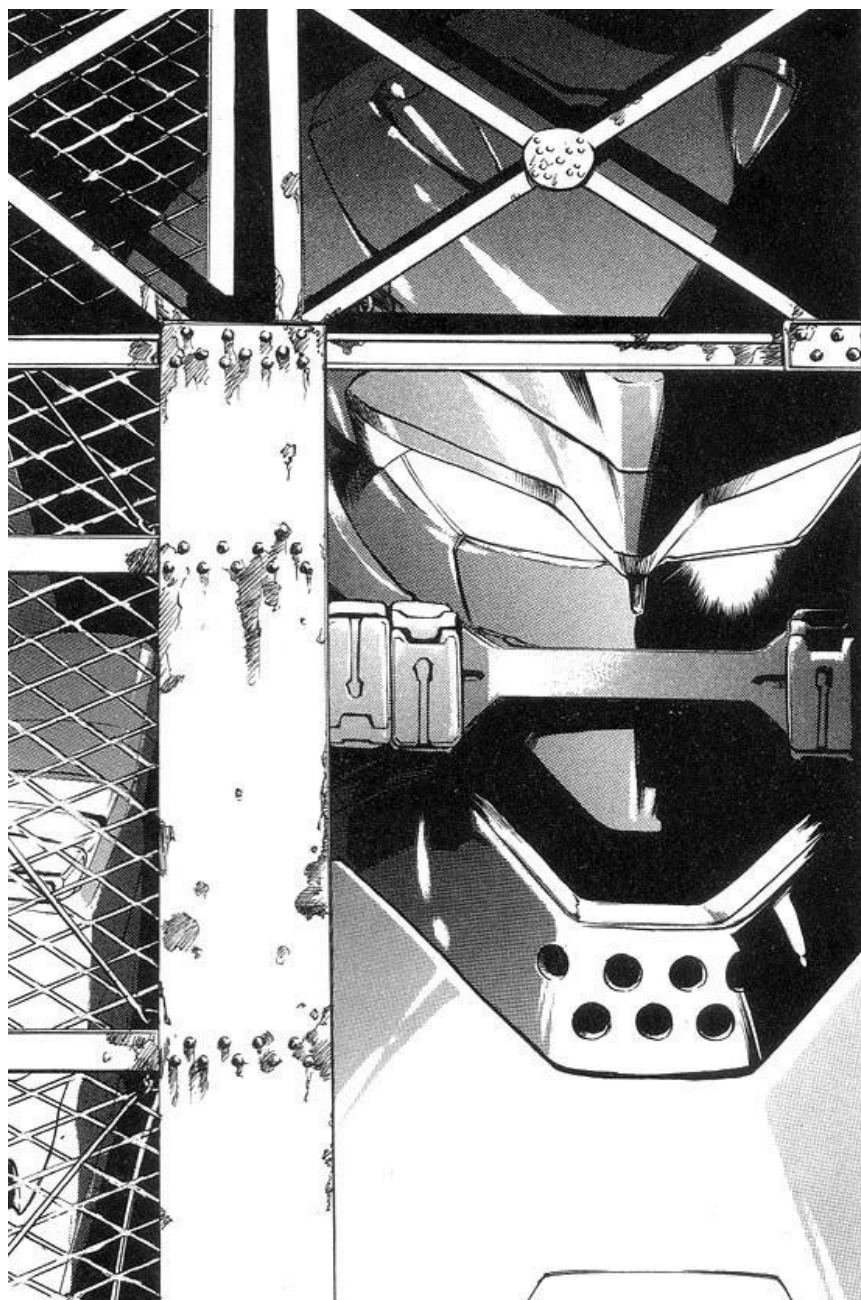
The sky was crimson, the color of a subtropical twilight.

The local birds, startled by the appearance of an eight-meter tall giant, emptied the area at once. Turning the switch on for the voice-activated control system, Sousuke said:

"AI."

<Yes, Sergeant.>

The machine's AI, 'AI', instantly replied.



“I want to know the temperature and humidity level of the surrounding area.”

<Temperature, 26 degrees. Humidity level, 83%.>

“What’s the reading for the muscle package balancer?”

<Check... 99. Highest level.>

It was the emotionless and deep voice of a man. Sousuke was able to change the voice of this identification system as he chose, but had left it the way it was when it was first initialized. On the other hand, the AI in Kurz’s unit used a sampling of his favorite Japanese singers.

Kurz...

Sousuke had left Kurz in the care of the barkeeper while he had come out here. Was he really okay? The maneuver that the Lieutenant had used on him, had he used the palm of his hand or what? It wasn’t normal to be able to knockout someone like Kurz with such an easy move. It was deeper than just an ordinary blow, probably some kind of Martial Arts.

The elevator, which had descended back down, was rising again. The Lieutenant probably had an M9 in a different hangar from the Arbalest.

That’s right- that black Lieutenant would be in an AS. And the fight with that AS was approaching. On the terms of taking back the slight against Captain McAllen in the bar.

“If you’re scared of taking the machine without permission, shall I make it an order?”

When he had said that, Sousuke didn’t hesitate.

I don’t know who you are or what you want, but I’ll show you something. If you think I’m just your average rookie, you’ve made a big mistake. I’ve been piloting ASes since I was ten. When I was in the Afghani guerrilla force, we stole an Rk-89 from the Soviet Military. Hamdora and I reworked it so that even though we

were kids, we could move it. Without the handicap, we crushed many of the latest models in those days- the Rk-92s.

It was seven years later now. He had fought in many battles, and piloted everything under the sun. The weapon that was the AS was becoming a second body to him.

I'll make you regret this... Sousuke thought deep down.

One thing after another had happened to him recently, and Sousuke was angry.

He didn't wait long before the elevator came up.

"Thanks for waiting", came the Lieutenant's voice over the external speaker.

He then stepped out of the cage. Sousuke's eyes widened when he saw the AS, its form revealed against the night.

It was the jet-black M9.

It had more armor added to its upper arms and thighs. On its head were two shining sensors for eyes. Except for not having a "scroll" attached to its mouth, it was a spitting image of the Arbalest.

The black M9.

There was no mistake. It was the same unit they met during the operation in Sicily.

"I haven't introduced myself yet, have I? My name is Lieutenant Belfangan Clouseau, and I was transferred here from the Mediterranean Fleet's Paltholon. I've been assigned to the *Tuatha De Danaan*'s SRT starting today. By the way, my call sign is 'Uruz 1'."

Uruz 1. That meant that he had been assigned to fill Captain McAllen's position, which had been vacant since the incident.

"Sergeant Sousuke Sagara. I heard about you from Lt. Commander Kalinin, but you don't seem like you're someone

superior to him in AS grappling. How ‘bout you show me what you got?”

The black M9 then released the equipment hatch on its left side and pulled out the training knife.



October 20th, 18:43 (Japan Standard Time)
Choufu-shi, Tokyo, Japan
Sengawa Shopping District

In the end, Sousuke never came to school.

He had done the same thing during the tests, and school had been very quiet because he wasn’t there. It wasn’t like Sousuke walked around 24 hours a day brandishing weapons and causing riots, but once a day or every two days for unpredictable reasons, he was guilty of nonsensical behavior which often caused confusion or embarrassment for everyone around him.

That given, school without him was quiet.

That’s what Kaname thought, other students aside. For her, just chatting with classmates, making noise and laughing out loud was somehow unsatisfying.

“I think I might have even caught his sickness...” Kaname mumbled as she and Kyouko were walking home from school, the area now completely dark. Kyouko just cackled.

“What’s so funny?”

“Well, it sounds like he’s some kind of weird illness or something when you say it like that.”

“Huh?”

Kaname had no clue what she meant, and gave her a blank look.

“It’s okay if you don’t get it... but you know, you’re kind of a strange one yourself, Kaname.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. How can I put it... I can’t tell if you’re more like an adult or more like a kid. At first glance you look like you might be in college, but there also seems to be something of an elementary school girl in you as well.”

“Hmm...”

Kaname immediately started brooding over what her best friend had said. But as far as Kyouko was concerned, Kaname felt like Kyouko was exactly opposite of herself- she looked like a child, but occasionally she’d say adult things like a high school student.

But that’s why Kaname liked Kyouko so much.

Kyouko Tokiwa. When compared to Kaname, she was much smaller. But that didn’t mean that their preferences didn’t match up. Personality-wise, Kaname was strong-willed and Kyouko was laid-back, and Kyouko’s reflexes weren’t as outstanding as Kaname’s were. Just lined up next to each other as they walked, the two looked like polar opposites.

But when Kaname looked at Kyouko, she often thought *“She’s so much better than me...”* She felt that way about what happened the day before as well as about other things. Sometimes she thought to herself, *“Why does Kyouko just smile at me when I’m such an idiot, but still hang around me anyway?”*

Since she heard the differing stories about “a guard from the Intelligence Department” from Tessa and Sousuke, Kaname had thought *“It couldn’t be Kyouko, could it?”* many times. However, when she really considered it, it would be impossible. She had been to Kyouko’s house many times, and had seen her parents and siblings many times as well.

“Kaname?”

“Hm...?”

“Ahhh, are you thinking about Sagara again?”

“...N-no reason to, is there? Give me a break,” she said, laughing it off. As she did, she saw something gleam out of the corner of her eye.

“Huh?”

They were walking through the shopping district in front of the Sengawa Station. It was a road where it was rare for a car to pass through. Pedestrian traffic was heavy, and the shouting of the nearby grocers echoed throughout the street. Kaname was able to see a sharp light flicker from the roof of the stationary shop building in their path.

Was that... the reflection off of a lens?

Because it was nighttime, the roof was dark. It was also far away.

But- Kaname saw it. It was faint, and melted into the rooftop, but she saw the dark shadow of a person quickly move.

There was probably only one. She was able to get a glance at his face, and for just one moment, she felt as if their eyes met. Up close, it was a man with short hair, and eyes slit as thin as thread. His features looked inhuman. He reminded her of the man with a knife that she met up with on the submarine earlier that summer.

Kaname thought that he smiled at her.

Then he vanished. She came to a stop, staring fixedly on that location, but didn't see any other movement except for that.

“What's wrong, Kaname?”

“Hm...? Oh, it's nothing,” Kaname answered, looking up at the roof.

“Nothing at all, let's go.”

“...?”

Kaname started walking again.

What was that?

She felt uneasy. She wasn't sure how to describe it- she just knew that something was wrong. It wasn't a feeling that she would be physically harmed, but hadn't she felt some malaise just now?

Yes. Malaise.

It was malaise as if something that she was secretly frightened of had finally come for her. Always, always, she had thought “*it'll come for me one day*”, and now she could hear the footsteps of the unspeakable reaper at her door.

With only that white light on the roof of the building, Kaname remembered that.

The pier in the blue ocean at the end of June.

Inside the submarine at the end of August.

The impressions she had felt in those places were resurrected in her mind.

It was strange. Very bad. Like this- she felt terribly uneasy.

No, it wasn't that. She was scared.

“Kaname...?”

Ignoring Kyouko, Kaname retrieved the phone from her bag, and recalled the number that she used frequently.

[Sousuke Sagara]

His name was displayed on the phone's LCD screen.

It'll be okay. It's gone through recently. Even on Kyouko's phone, the call went through. He'll tell me “It's not a problem.”

Sousuke...

This is crazy. Why am I so upset? Why am I bothered that the phone's not ringing?

Sousuke...!?

Then came the sound of it picking up.

“Hello? Sou-”

“We’re sorry, the phone number you have dialed has been disconnected or is no longer in service. Please check the number, and try again. We’re sorry, the phone number you have dialed has been disconnected or is no longer in service. Please check the number, and try again. We’re sorry, the phone number you have dialed-”

The voice somehow sounded cold and inhuman-

To Be Continued in Part 2...

The Afterword, or Middle-word

Thank you for waiting. Although we had to finally split up the story into two volumes, we present to you the first volume of “Ending Day-by-Day”. I know that for students who are just getting by on what little pocket money they have, two volumes aren’t very cost-efficient. Nevertheless, it had to be so for various reasons, my lack of ability and unavoidable reasons- please forgive me. I’m sorry.

This volume is kind of like an interval episode, really focused on the settling of the ITB affair, situations within Mithril, hijinx of school life, as well as the not-so-normal drama. The title is “Ending Day by Day”, but really this series doesn’t seem like it’s going to end. Different from the short stories, the long story of Sousuke and the others is changing. With this and that. But it’s still a little early for the sudden changes.

However, if you reread this story- everyone’s feelings are strangely on the edge. Character after character appears displeased about one thing after another, being irritated and irrational. No, it’s not really because the author, me, is upset.

By the way, the Admiral Jerome Borda in the story actually was a soldier in real life (several years ago he died “fairly depressed in a suicide”) that I’m using as a model. But for those who knew him, please think of him as a different person for the time being. A model up to his death, he’s the product of the imprudent wild ideas of the author who says “what if he lived in the Full Metal Panic universe?” I only guessed his personality and way of talking from the stories of people who knew him.

I want to get the next volume out as soon as possible, but I think it will be early next year at best. Too slow? No, I’m really

sorry about it. Please be patient, and somehow continue with them on their journey.

Since I'm not finished yet, thanks for letting me get this far this time.

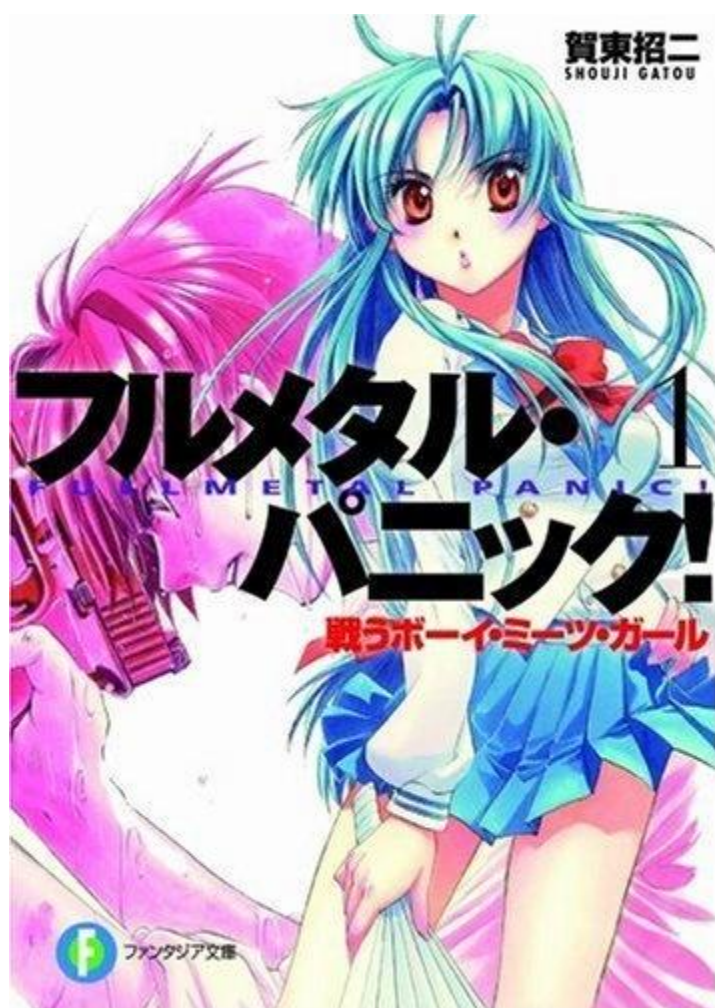
Sousuke, who's stretching himself out. The evil that is drawing near to Kaname. The appearance of the real enemies. Will the two be able to meet again in the end?

The comeback of "but, 'dammit~'..." and such of the people who are reading the short stories will be put in the next volume. So forget about it for the time being, okay?

I'll save the thanks until the next volume. Until then, please follow along with Sousuke into hell again next time.

- Shinji Gatou

October 2000





賀東招二
SHOUJI GATOU

フルメタル・パニック! 3

揺れるイントウ・ザ・ブルー

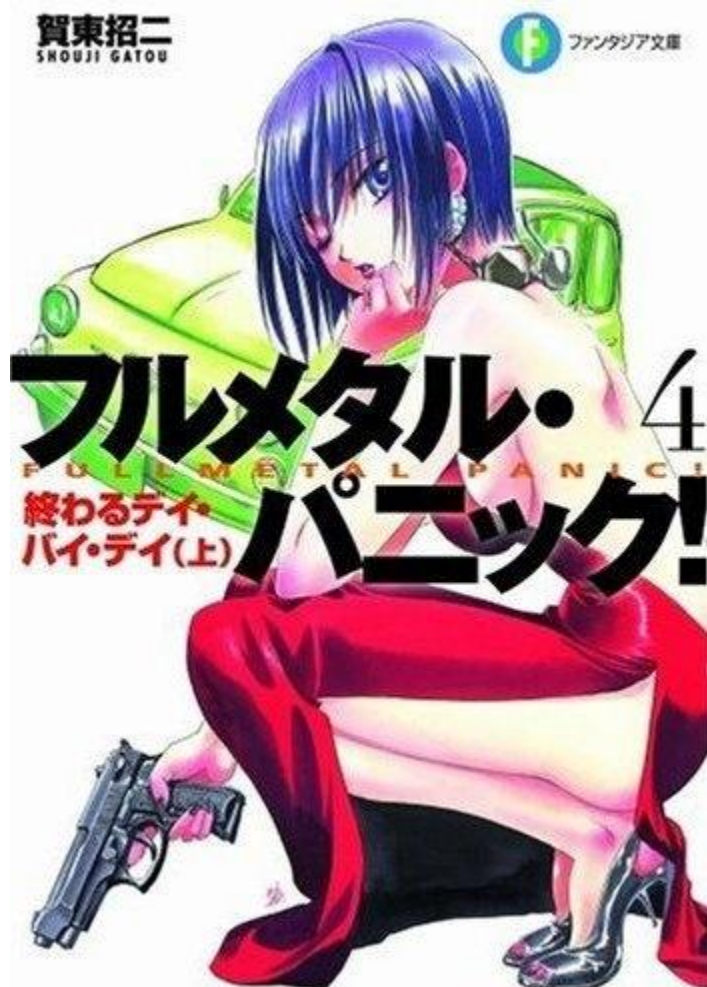


ファンタジア文庫

賀東招二
SHOUJI GATOU



ファンタジア文庫



Translator's Afterword:

Thanks for all the interest in these translations. I found these novels browsing through the local bookstore near my apartment when I lived in Japan last year. I had loved both the anime and manga series, so I decided to try the novels out because I wanted to know what else happens. This novel in particular looked interesting (mainly because it picked up where the first season left off). I had never read a Japanese novel before, so I decided to type out my translations because I would understand it better. I really had no intention of releasing it because I thought, "not many people will want to read it because it doesn't have pictures," but Mukanshin convinced me otherwise, so here it is. So a special thanks goes to him.

This first novel has taken me almost six months to complete, although the latter half went pretty quickly after I became acquainted with everything that was going on. I will go ahead and apologize for mistakes I made- there are a few, and I know there will be more. I just wish I were able to give this story the excellent standard of translation I think it deserves, but hopefully this one hasn't been too bad to read. Between having to look up the names of real weapons, fictional weapons, foreign words, etc, etc, this has turned into quite a little project, but one I've been more than glad to do (and at the expense of my other projects ^^;;). Anyway, look forward to the continuation of the story in the next volume.

2004, Brandi

Boku-tachi

<http://www.boku-tachi.net>

Translated by **Brandi**

Edited by **Mukanshin** and **Moonfaerie24**